

Altered Images: The Labour Party and the Soviet Union in the 1930s

Jonathan Shaw Davis

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy awarded by De Montfort University

August 2002

This thesis examines how the Labour Party used the Soviet Union in the 1930s and how the Soviet Union affected the development of the political thought and actions of the Labour Party. The emergence and continued presence of the USSR after 1917 offered a “working model” of socialism to socialists in the Labour Party. Yet while this appeared to have similar aims to some of the strands of socialist thought within the party, many Labourites felt uneasy at the fact that this aggressive form of socialism had such support within the party. Throughout the 1930s there was a clash between Labour’s different socialist traditions. This was made more acute by the actions of the Soviet Union and the Comintern, and this struggle helped to define the Labour Party.

The thesis begins by placing the USSR in the context of other socialist influences within the British labour movement. It then reflects upon how Labour dealt with the USSR when it was in Government, and it explores how Labourites who visited the country during the period gathered information about the Soviet Union.

The thesis then concentrates on the role of the Soviet Union as a definer of the Labour Party in its foreign policy, its internal party politics and its economic thought. At the time, other external forces, namely an unstable capitalist system and the rise of fascism in Europe, were forging a highly turbulent decade. The USSR appeared to offer a way of coping with the desperate problems of the 1930s, as it was used to offer hope against economic depression and the far-right in Britain and Europe.

The thesis finds that the Soviet Union played a more significant role – both negatively and positively – in the development of the Labour Party than is generally thought.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following for their help in the production of this document. It was possible and also for the work that enabled me to visit the archives in London.

I wish to thank the staff of the British Library for their help in the production of this document. I wish to thank the staff of the British Library for their help in the production of this document. I wish to thank the staff of the British Library for their help in the production of this document.

I would like to thank the following for their help in the production of this document. I wish to thank the staff of the British Library for their help in the production of this document. I wish to thank the staff of the British Library for their help in the production of this document.

For Mum and Dad

This document is dedicated to my mother and father who have been my greatest support and inspiration. I wish to thank them for their love and support. I wish to thank them for their love and support. I wish to thank them for their love and support.

To Mum and Dad. Their love and support is constant, as is their help. I wish to thank them for their love and support. I wish to thank them for their love and support. I wish to thank them for their love and support.

I wish to thank the following for their help in the production of this document. I wish to thank the staff of the British Library for their help in the production of this document. I wish to thank the staff of the British Library for their help in the production of this document.

I wish to thank the following for their help in the production of this document. I wish to thank the staff of the British Library for their help in the production of this document. I wish to thank the staff of the British Library for their help in the production of this document.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank De Montfort University for the funding that made this Doctoral thesis possible, and also for the grant that enabled me to visit the archives in Moscow.

I wish to express my gratitude to Mark Sandle. He was always available and inspirational when needed, his comments and ideas were always greatly received and appreciated, and his friendship and support are invaluable. And to Panikos Panayi for his encouragement, contributions and friendship.

I would also like to thank Ed Bacon, Chris Read, Andrew Thorpe, David Ryan, David Sadler, Nick Carter, Jason McDonald, Kevin Davey and Paul Anderson who have all helped in different ways. Also to Wally Oppenheim, who started me on this trip, and Cathy, Bill and Anna. And to Mike Berry, Olga Alexandrovna and Victoria Cylbulski for teaching me Russian.

There are many librarians and archivists who deserve thanks. Nigel and Graham at the Baykov Library in Birmingham for their exceptional assistance; the staff at De Montfort University library, the University of Warwick library and the British Library. The staff at the Public Record Office and the British Library Newspaper archive. And to the archivists at the Modern Record Office at Warwick for their help, to Ray Collins at the TGWU for permission to view Ernest Bevin's papers, and the National Museum of Labour History in Manchester. Special thanks must go to the staff at the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History in Moscow, for all of their help.

To Mum and Dad. Their love and support is constant, as is their help, and I want to thank them for this and everything that they have done to help me complete this thesis. Thanks especially to Dad for proof reading it all. Also to Richard, Sharon and Louis for the interest they have shown in this thesis.

Thanks must also be given to my friends who knew when to ask about this work, and when not to: Steve, Nicola and Sol, Michael, Steve, Sarah and Lin. Thanks to Linda and Graham for their help with computers. Thanks to Julie for making me so welcome in Moscow, and also to Manga and Steve. To Tony and Saiorse, Matt and Janice, and Glenn and co.

And finally to Sharon, without whom this would have been neither possible nor worthwhile. I want to thank her for her love and support, for making the difficult times less difficult, the fun times more fun and for learning far more about the Labour Party and the Soviet Union than she needs or wants to know.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Labour Party: Forming an identity	16
1.1 Socialist purity or electoral pragmatism?	18
1.2 The Independent Labour Party	29
1.3 The Fabians, the SDF and the Socialist League	31
1.4 The presence of the USSR in the post-war Labour Party	37
1.5 The Socialist League	41
1.6 Conclusion	44
Chapter 2: Labour, the revolutions and the Kremlin	47
2.1 Rejoice at the fall of Tsarism	48
2.2 The Internationals	60
2.3 The first Labour Government and the USSR	64
2.4 Labour out of Office	74
2.5 Labour's second government and the USSR	77
2.6 Conclusion	93
Chapter 3: Searching for Truth: Labour's visits to Communist Russia	97
3.1 1920: Lansbury, MacDonald and the first official delegation	102
3.2 A visit to post-Leninist Russia	118
3.3 Stalin's Russia through Labour eyes	127
3.4 Fabian gradualists in revolutionary Russia	131
3.5 The NFRB – organised Fabians in the USSR	138
3.6 Labour's leaders in the USSR	149

Chapter 4:	Labour's International policy, the USSR and fascism	157
4.1	Labour's Foreign Policy after MacDonald	159
4.2	The end of Labour's pacifism: rearmament and Spain	182
4.3	Conclusion: Towards War	197
Chapter 5:	Defining Labour: internal politics and the Soviet Union	201
5.1	A post-Election shift to the left	205
5.2	Disaffiliation: Labour sheds its far-left wing	214
5.3	The 1932 Conference	220
5.4	Defining Labour's socialism: fighting and rejecting Communism in Britain	223
5.5	Maintaining support for Stalin: respecting the socialist 'family'	236
5.6	Conclusion	250
Chapter 6:	Labour's Economic thought and the USSR	253
6.1	The Soviet model and the NFRB	258
6.2	From Soviet socialism to the social democratic models	275
6.3	Conclusion	292
Conclusion		294
Bibliography		308

INTRODUCTION

There are certain areas of the Labour Party's history that have been studied in great depth. There are numerous biographies of party leaders and important figures in the labour movement. And the latest area that historians have focused on is, naturally, the party's recent centenary. Labour has once again come under the microscope of history as answers are sought to questions about its successes and failures when it was in and out of power and about what type of party Labour is. Yet one area that still has not received the attention it deserves is Labour's relationship with the Soviet Union in the 1930s, despite the fact that this is an era that offers answers to all of the above questions.

In this decade, Labour was in power (albeit for a very short period), it had some minor successes, some major failures, it had interaction with a number of countries, especially the USSR, and faced some challenges to its understanding of what socialism was. The 1930s were a time when Labour needed to define and redefine its character and beliefs, in order to become a party that could again win elections. And this means that understanding this decade and how Labour responded to the challenges posed by the "working model" of socialism that was the USSR, is absolutely crucial to understanding how Labour became the party it was not only in the 1940s, but also in the post-Attlee years as well.

When looking for the key moments in Labour's history, there are the obvious choices of when it was formed, when it led its first government, when it led its most successful administration (though that may be open to debate) and when it began to move away from its traditional ideals and principles (again debatable). But if the purpose is to establish *defining* moments, when the party stood at a crossroads and had to make difficult choices about the *type* of party it was and was to be, then this is harder as there are fewer moments to choose from. However, the 1930s were

definitely one of these moments, when the party's relationship with the USSR defined the party's understanding of its own political thought.

There is a common maxim that states that Marx has not been especially important to the Labour Party. One historian who has ventured onto the ground that covers the Labour Party and the USSR states that it is 'wishful thinking to claim...that Marx, not Keynes, became the dominant intellectual power in the mainstream of the Labour movement in the 1930s.'¹ While Andrew Williams' debunking of the idea that Marx was a powerful *intellectual* presence is largely correct, this statement, and the overall cliché, is in much need of a rethink. While it is not argued in this thesis that Labour followed the path of Soviet socialism, one of the underlying themes is that the USSR played a major role in defining the Labour Party. To be clear, while Marx was not a major influence on Labour minds, the Soviet Union, which claimed the Marxist mantle, was.

In the main areas of Labour's interests – foreign, internal party politics and economic – the USSR played a defining role as Labour looked to the Soviet model of socialism in order to construct its own ideas. However, the Soviet Union failed in its role as “teacher”, as, on the whole Labour shaped what type of party it was by *rejecting* Soviet-style socialism. Labour's most positive response to Eastern ideas was in the field of economics. Even then, Labour's theorists who embraced the concepts behind the Five Year Plan could not foresee the wholesale introduction of Soviet planning in Britain. But the presence of these ideas meant that Labour embraced the ideas of planning and state intervention as a basis for the economic structure for Britain.

The party's historic mission in this period was to challenge capitalism – either to succeed and work for the whole population by allowing piecemeal social reform

¹ A. Williams, 'The Labour Party's Attitude to the Soviet Union, 1927-35: An Overview with Specific Reference to Unemployment and Peace', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 22, (1987), pp.80-81

(which was advocated by the “gradualists” in the party), or to crumble in the face of the might of a united, socialist working-class. This challenge was met in the 1940s by a government willing to fuse the two ideologies together by pursuing a regulated capitalism that incorporated some nationalisation. This could not have been achieved had Labour not already established what type of intervention it would pursue when it was next in power.

It was in this way that the USSR helped to form Labour’s boundaries concerning the type of party it was to be, and therefore this is a period that needs to be studied in more depth. Labourites used Soviet socialism in different ways in the turbulent 1930s when the party had to come to terms with a crushing electoral defeat, the Great Depression and the rise of fascism. Faced with these monumental problems, Labour used the USSR in a number of different ways. Some in the party saw the Soviet Union as a partner in the fight against the fascist threat, some saw it as a meddling revolutionary entity that threatened Labour’s traditional support base and ideals, while others saw it as a beacon of hope, promising to deliver socialism to the world.

Each of these interpretations of what the USSR was helped Labour to define its own political thought. There was a sense of urgency in this as capitalism appeared to be on the verge of collapse and other political models were ready to replace it. Labour needed to be clear in its own mind as to what it was and what it was not. The presence of Soviet socialism added to the many other socialist traditions that grew up with, and out of, the Labour Party. However, it is difficult to argue that Labour was a socialist party. That is not to say that socialist ideas and actions have not played a part in the way the party thought and acted. There can be little doubt that Labour has been influenced by the various strands of socialism in the party’s history. These have acted as a driving force for members, leaders and opinion formers alike.

But, whenever Labour has formed a government, it has failed to fundamentally alter the basis of capitalism. Attlee's Government perhaps came closest to this, but the fundamentals of capitalism remained largely intact. It is therefore easier to place Labour within the specifically social democratic / progressive bracket, even though many members laid claim to the socialist traditions of Britain. Labour was then, a progressive party with socialists in it, who were united by a common belief in socialism, even though what that socialism was was not always agreed on, or acted upon.

It was this shared belief in socialism though, that made many in the Labour Party turn to the USSR in the 1930s. The Soviet Union appeared to have answers to all of the questions raised in this decade, and seemed to offer a way out of the desperation that accompanied the 1930s, thus demonstrating that ideas and context were intertwined in this decade. Had the 1930s not been so traumatic, the USSR may well have been only a passing interest to even the most passionate Kremlin supporters. Labour's political predicament was also an important factor. The fact that Labour was out of power gave the party time to explore new and different ideas and models of socialism and social democracy, such as the USSR, the New Deal in America and Sweden.

There must have been a tacit acceptance amongst the more realistic Labourites that the party would not win an election for some time, given the fact that in 1931 only 46 Labour MPs returned to Parliament. Therefore, Labourites knew that they had time on their side in which to restructure the party. This truly was a defining decade for the Labour Party. Given the importance of this decade, and also the positive and negative influences that the Soviet Union had on Labour, it is surprising that there are so few studies concerned with either Labour and the USSR, Labour and the 1930s, or both.

It is therefore time to reflect on the impact the Soviet Union had on the Labour Party in this decade as a whole, to add to histories that have been written on these subjects.

It is only possible to suggest why this subject has not been studied in more depth in these years. The collapse of the Soviet Union has seen the CPSU archives open in Russia, leading many historians, naturally, to choose to explore the internal history of the country, looking at Lenin's leadership, Stalin's Russia and Gorbachev's *perestroika*. In the international sphere, it is the Soviet Union's actions during the Cold War that provokes most interest. Labour historians, it has already been noted, tended to prepare for the party's centenary in 2000.

This reflects the fact that the main studies that have been made into this subject were all written before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Stephen Richards Graubard was the first to explore the Labour Party's reaction to the Russian Revolution. His work, *British Labour and the Russian Revolution 1917-1924*² is a helpful starting point as it concentrates on the seven years between the revolution and the first Labour Government. The main areas of interest for Graubard, apart from the revolutionary period, were the intervention in the Civil War, the Internationals and also the visits made by Labour delegations. An underlying theme of the book is Labour's acceptance that the Russians should be allowed to forge their own destiny without outside interference, while it also looks at the importance that Labour placed upon trade with the Russians.

The next key text came from Bill Jones. *The Russia complex*³ offers a comprehensive overview of the development of the Labour-USSR relationship from the end of Tsarist rule in 1917 to the post-Berlin blockade period, although the book's conclusion does venture a little further into the Cold War era. The first two chapters of Jones' book cover the period that concerns this thesis, and it asks a number of questions based around one of his major themes – 'the part played by Labour perceptions of Soviet

² S. R. Graubard, *British Labour and the Russian Revolution 1917-1924*, London, 1956

³ B. Jones, *The Russia complex. The British Labour Party and the Soviet Union*, Manchester, 1977

Russia in the development and post-war decline of the idea of a distinctive ‘socialist foreign policy’’.⁴

One of the questions he asks, which is also addressed in this thesis, is ‘[w]hy did so many British socialists, often brilliant men and women, ignore all the evidence to the contrary and insist upon seeing Stalin’s Russia as a Utopia to be visited, marvelled at and defended against its detractors?’⁵ Jones suggests that it was a mixture of their age and the fact that the Webbs believed that the USSR had embarked upon a Fabian journey that constructed socialism from the top down. To these answers, for others as well as for the Webbs, must be added context, as Labourites’ thoughts on the USSR cannot be seen without taking into account the problems of the 1930s.

In *The Russia complex*, Jones claims that British socialists, sixty years after the revolution, ‘possibly sees a...bleak, highly centralised bureaucratic machine; certainly he sees a State with the unpleasant, not to say unsocialist habit of suppressing dissident views.’⁶ He continues to say that this was not always the case, and rightly notes that ‘...during the ’thirties a typical member of the Labour Party might have described Soviet Russia in glowing terms, as a hugely successful experiment in planned economics and advanced approaches to social, political and legal questions...’⁷ His point that ‘most socialists still view the USSR through the harshly uncomplimentary lens of the Cold War period,’⁸ highlights the fact that events that occur when the reader reads history will, in some way, influence what conclusions are reached.

Jones’ other main point in the book is that, for thirty years or so, Labour ‘had a “love affair” with the Soviet Union...[which was] an integral part of the history of the

⁴ Ibid, p.vii

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, p.vii

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

party'⁹, and although this statement is completely ruled out by Andrew Williams, author of the latest works on Labour's attitude to the USSR, Jones makes a valuable contribution to the limited scholarship on this subject.

The final studies in Labour-Soviet relations come from Andrew Williams. His article concerning Labour's unemployment and peace policies and the USSR between 1927-1935 laid the basis for his wider examination of the party's attitude to the Soviet Union between 1924-1934¹⁰. This is a very specific exploration of history that concentrates on the two aforementioned topics, whilst broadening the study to incorporate the first Labour Government and the period when the Conservative Government ended diplomatic relations with the USSR. It also adds to the limited historiography on the visits made by Labourites to the USSR.¹¹

Williams examines many issues in the book, not least the question of the USSR being an 'exemplar' for the Labour Party. This is a very important feature of any study of these two 'socialist' entities. The USSR was seen, at times, as a teacher, and the Labour Party has always found the time to review other models of socialism and social democracy, from the USSR in the 1930s to the American Democrats in the 1990s. The point is to understand how far these other models of political thought influenced and defined the party's own theories.

Labour's Attitude also focuses quite heavily on how the USSR formed an integral part of Labour's policies after the fall of the MacDonald Government. It is especially interested in the start of the economic debates concerning the Five Year Plan the Soviet Union as an element of Labour's foreign policy as it sought to include it in the

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ A. Williams, *Labour and Russia: The attitude of the Labour Party to the USSR, 1924-1934*, Manchester, 1989

¹¹ The main texts on this subject, which are mentioned later, are D. Caute, *The Fellow Travellers*, New York, USA, 1973, S. Margulies, *The Pilgrimages to Russia; The Soviet Union and the Treatment of Foreigners, 1924-1937*, Madison, USA, 1968 and S. White, 'British Labour in Soviet Russia', *English Historical Review*, 109, (1994)

League of Nations, which the USSR joined in 1934. Williams also identifies that there was a 'new' and 'old' left, and a new centre-right in the party after 1931, and he highlights how these differed in their approach to the Kremlin. This is a very informative book which uses many primary sources that help to construct a detailed account of the relationship between the Labour Party's leadership and the Soviet Union in an important period of Labour's history.

There are some omissions from the existing literature dealing specifically with the Labour Party and the Soviet Union. For example, Jones' *Russia complex* offers little on Labour's two governments and it does not place enough emphasis on the important issue of the Five Year Plan and the economic thought of the Labour Party. In Williams' detailed study, more emphasis perhaps could have been given to the ideological aspects to this area, as both parties were tied to socialism. *Labour's Attitude* focuses to some extent on the ILP, but the interest in this group ends too early, and neglects to look at the relationship between the ILP and CPGB which caused the leadership so many problems.

There are of course other works that cover Britain and the USSR, but the focus is not specifically Labour-Soviet relations. Some look at Western intervention in the Russian Civil War and this period in general,¹² while others offer a broader overview.¹³ Andrew Thorpe has recently bridged the gap between the histories of Labour and the USSR and the British left and the USSR, with his article 'Stalinism and British Politics',¹⁴ and his recent book, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-1943*.¹⁵

¹² See R. Ullman, *Britain and the Russian Civil War November 1918-December 1920*, Princeton, USA, 1968 and J. Silverlight, *The Victor's Dilemma: Allied Intervention in the Russian Civil War*, London, 1920

¹³ See G. Gorodetsky, *The Precarious Truce: Anglo-Soviet Relations 1924-1977*, Cambridge, 1977 and his edited book *Soviet Foreign Policy 1917-199: A Retrospective*, London, 1994, and S. White, *Britain and the Bolshevik Revolution*, London, 1979

¹⁴ A. Thorpe, 'Stalinism and British Politics', *History*, 83, (1998)

¹⁵ A. Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow 1920-43*, Manchester, 2000

‘Stalinism and British Politics’ compares the different approaches taken by Labour and the Communist Party of Great Britain to Stalinism, which Thorpe traces back to Labour’s move away from federalism in 1918. The

fissure between parliamentary and revolutionary Socialism, already apparent in Britain before the Russian Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, was strongly reinforced by events in Russia and especially the formation of the Communist International, of which the CPGB was a more or less loyal section.¹⁶

The fact that Labour continued to house communist revolutionaries, rather than see them follow their own paths as they did in Europe (where Communists in countries such as France and Germany broke from the Social Democratic parties) was a very important factor in the way the Labour Party was able to define its own ideas in the 1930s, as there were constant calls from inside the party for the CPGB to be allowed to affiliate to Labour, or for a softer line to be taken where the USSR was concerned.

The British Communist Party and Moscow uses sources from the newly opened archives in Moscow, and challenges some of the established ideas that the CPGB was the Kremlin’s unthinking slave. It does not argue that the CPGB was independent, claiming that ‘there is...material here to hearten those who wish to see the hidden hand of Moscow in most of the CPGB’s activities’,¹⁷ but instead it portrays an image of conflict and disharmony not normally associated with Western visions of “monolithic” communist politics. The overall thesis therefore adds to what is termed ‘revisionist’ history of the USSR, as it breaks free from the Totalitarian argument that assumes complete control from Moscow in all spheres of life. The time period of the book also adds to the comparatively few works on the British labour movement and the 1930s.

¹⁶ Thorpe, ‘Stalinism and British Politics’, p.609

¹⁷ Thorpe, *British Communist Party, Moscow*, p.277

The main works here are Ben Pimlott's *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* and John F. Naylor's *Labour's International Policy*.¹⁸ Pimlott's study concentrates on the strengths and weaknesses of the left in the Labour Party in this decade, and also the challenges it made to the Labour leadership through bodies such as the Socialist League and the coalitions of the United and Popular Fronts. Naylor's book traces the roots of Labour's foreign policy, but naturally focuses largely on how the party responded to the threat of fascism. Neither book, however, lends much space to the USSR, which is surprising given the important role the Soviet Union played in the main areas of Labour interest.

A new book on Labour in the 1930s that also suffers from this omission is John Swift's *Labour in Crisis*.¹⁹ There are passing references to the Soviet Union, especially concerning planning, but this work examines Clement Attlee's role in Labour's recovery after 1931. After tracing Attlee's journey from his middle-class background to leader of the labour movement, it challenges the idea that Attlee was an unambitious leader, arguing that he 'provided more effective leadership than is usually accepted',²⁰ as *Labour in Crisis* explores this period of the party's history from quite a personal perspective.

This thesis is a study of a specific time with the specific aim to demonstrate how the USSR's presence influenced Labour's political thought, and it is therefore worth noting some of the literature that also covers some of the wider themes explored here, such as Labour's ideas, political thought and purpose. Recent research into Labour's one hundred years, such as the collection of essays in *Labour's First Century*,²¹ edited by Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo, have tried to emphasise the

¹⁸ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, Cambridge, 1977 and J. F. Naylor, *Labour's International Policy, The Labour Party in the 1930s*, London 1969. Among other works that cover this period, see K. Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics 1935-1941*, Manchester, 1989 and J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941*, London, 1982

¹⁹ J. Swift, *Labour in Crisis. Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in Opposition, 1931-40*, Houndmills, 2001

²⁰ Ibid, p.4

²¹ D. Tanner, P. Thane, & N. Tiratsoo, *Labour's First Century*, Cambridge, 2000

successes and positive achievements Labour have made, whilst highlighting perceived weaknesses as well, and this approach judges 'Labour against its own aims and values, and against what might reasonably have been expected.'²²

In other words, rather than criticising the party for not being socialist enough, or for not treading a Marxist path, it offers a more realistic evaluation of Labour in and out of power. Such a position has perhaps emerged because of Labour's own re-evaluation of what its beliefs are since the mid-1980s, and it looks to move away from the fighting of 'old internal Labour battles, between supposedly 'conservative' trade unions and 'radical' socialist intellectuals, between evolutionary and active models of change...'²³ This is not to say that ideology does not play a part in these histories, and Harris rightly notes that there is an 'artificiality of the fixed ideological lineages'²⁴ in Labour's political thought. This thesis also recognises this, and as such tries to move away from 'Left' and 'Right' labels where possible, as there was a certain amount of agreement between the two wings on issues in the 1930s. Of course, this was not always the case, but the terms 'ideological' and 'pragmatic' have been chosen instead, as most groups at times in this decade acted in both practical and ideological ways.

Other histories of the party written with the centenary in mind include Andrew Thorpe's *A History of the British Labour Party*²⁵ and another edited collection of essays covering the one hundred years by Brian Brivati and Richard Heffernan in *The Labour Party: A Centenary*.²⁶ This offers a wide range of debates from contributors including Michael Foot, Denis Healey and Clare Short, and explores the rise of the Labour Party and New Labour.

Where purpose and ideas are concerned, Thorpe's *History* notes that the

²² Ibid, p.2

²³ J. Harris, 'Labour's Political and Social Thought', in *ibid*, p.10

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ A. Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, Houndmills, 1997

²⁶ B. Brivati & R. Heffernan, *The Labour Party: A Centenary*, Basingstoke, 2000

basic reason for the formation of the Labour Party was defensive. It was not the mark of a working class rising up to take power, but a body established to protect the rights of workers, and of trade unions in particular, at a time when they were coming under renewed threat.²⁷

He also argues that Labour was not a socialist party, even though it contained socialists. He is correct in his assertion that this did not mean that socialism was unimportant, and rightly identifies Labour's socialism as vague, which meant that it could act as 'a unifying myth when all else failed.'²⁸

However, other historians have asked the question *What's Wrong With Labour?*²⁹ as they look to the link between the party and the unions, and the 'ideology' of Labourism that emerged from that link. Keith Laybourn's *Century of Labour*³⁰ certainly looks at the former, while Allender's book explores the latter. All of these works add much information to help answer the long-asked question 'what does Labour stand for?' and this is also an underlying question in this thesis, but attention here is turned to outside of the party to help explain its defining process, rather than to its many internal traditions.³¹

A note must be made on the choice of sources that have been used. It must be appreciated that at the time when Graubard, Jones and Williams were writing, Russian sources would have been hard to come by, though newspapers such as *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* would have been available. This has left a gap in the history of relations between Labour and the USSR that still needs to be filled. This thesis cannot claim to rely heavily on recently released documents from the CPSU archives. Archival research can still be difficult in Russia. But it does include some new documentary

²⁷ Thorpe, *History*, p.233

²⁸ Ibid, p.234

²⁹ P. Allender, *What's Wrong With Labour?*, London, 2001

³⁰ K. Laybourn, *A Century of Labour. A History of the Labour Party 1900-2000*, Stroud, 2000

³¹ Works offering in-depth analyses of some of these traditions include T. Cliff & D. Gluckstein, *The Labour Party- A Marxist History*, London, 1988; G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought. A History*, Houndmills, 1997 and J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism*, Massachusetts, USA, 1983

evidence from the Comintern archives in Moscow, which confirms that the Labour hierarchy was often right to be highly suspicious of the attitude of the Comintern during the early 1930s. Indeed, part of the Third International's purpose in this period was

to show the role of the Labour Party as the chief social supporter of the bourgeoisie and how it weakens and divides the working class by showing illusions regarding Democracy and enchainning it to "constitutional methods." Thus the Labour Party acts as an accomplice of Fascism and the democratic institutions are utilised in order to prepare the way for it.³²

Labour had to find its own answers in an ever more hostile environment while it was attacked from the left, and, in so doing, often defined itself by establishing what it was not – in this case an extension of Moscow.

The personal papers of some leading Labourites have been used in this study. Ramsay MacDonald's papers when he was Prime Minister, and Arthur Henderson's when he was Foreign Secretary were both very useful when looking at Labour's official dealings with the USSR. The papers of Ernest Bevin, and some private responses from Walter Citrine also add much to establishing the opinions of some of the key figures in the movement.

The newspapers and journals that made up the 'Labour Press' have also been used as much as possible, as these give an excellent idea of how the party as a whole felt. Articles by opinion formers such as G. D. H. Cole, Michael Farbman, Kingsley Martin and Arthur Henderson among others allows a broad picture to be drawn, showing that Labour had many different ideas about the USSR and also the problems of the 1930s. These ideas are also reflected in the numerous party pamphlets and discussions at Conferences throughout the period.

³² Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History [RGA] 495/100/881, document no.7835/6

This study places Labour's relationship with the Soviet Union into the wider context of the party's quest for an identity, as it sought to define its political thought. What follows aims to show that the Labour Party used the USSR in both positive and negative ways, as it rejected and accepted elements of Soviet socialism, whilst trying to establish what type of party it was and wanted to be. If there was one thing that united the whole party in the 1930s, it was the fact that it could not ignore what was happening in the USSR, and that the Soviet model of socialism defined Labour's political thought in one way or another.

The study begins with an overview of the different strands of socialism and the different socialist factions that existed within the Labour Party before and during the 1930s. Because of the eclectic nature of Labour's socialism, the type of socialism Labour advocated generally depended on who was leading the party at the time. There has always been such a range of different socialisms on offer to Labour members – ethical, scientific, gradualist, Marxist – that a leader could claim to represent the true principles and values of the Labour Party if he came from one of the groups that promoted these ideas, and Chapter One looks at each of the most influential groups. The next two chapters explore how Labourites came to terms with what was happening in Russia. Chapter Two covers the years 1917-1931, incorporating the rise of the Internationals and the two Labour governments while Chapter Three pays close attention to the many visits made by official and unofficial delegations to the country after 1917.

The next three chapters focus on the developments in the main areas of interest for the party as it sought to clarify its position and ideas after 1931. Chapter Four is concerned with the USSR's role in Labour's foreign policy as fascism threatened Europe, taking into account the Spanish Civil War and the party's decision to accept rearmament. Chapter Five examines Labour's internal politics as it came under increasing pressure from left-wing Labourites and the CPGB, paying particular

attention to the battles fought with the Communist Party, as it encroached upon traditional Labour territory. Chapter Six looks at the planning debates within the party and assesses how influential the Soviet model was in Labour's decision to tread a more interventionist path. It also looks at the two other models Labour studied – the New Deal in America and social democracy in Sweden, and this allows a slightly wider perspective to be gained, which is important when examining how the main traditions that shaped Labour's political thought dealt with the Soviet challenge.

CHAPTER ONE

The Labour Party – Forming an Identity

It is indeed true that Socialism is the basis of the Labour Party's faith.¹

During the 1920s, the Labour Party formed two governments. Of paramount importance to the programmes of both administrations were close relations with the Soviet Union. The approach taken concerning the USSR represented far more than simply hoping for good diplomatic and economic relations with a foreign country. In some ways, dealing with the Soviet Union forced Labour to define more specifically what type of party it was. It added an important dimension to Labour's much wider search for an identity, especially once the party was forced to question its beliefs after one of its most influential figures, James Ramsay MacDonald, formed a National Government with Conservative and Liberal MPs in 1931.

The USSR posed more of a challenge to the Labour Party than any other country partly because of the shared belief in socialism but also because of the nature of the Labour Party itself. Unlike the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), there was no single, overriding definition of socialism that guided the Labour Party in the way Marxism did for the CPSU. The many ideas and beliefs that contributed to Labour's understanding of socialism allowed the party to create a more fluid and eclectic form of socialism, and this chapter places the Soviet Union's influence within the context of the other forces that shaped Labour's socialism from its early days through to the 1930s when the USSR was at its most influential.

The first section looks at how the boundaries of Labour's socialism were determined by the chosen parliamentary route to power, assessing whether the party was driven more by ideology or pragmatism. It is suggested that the reality was that both were

¹ Labour Party, *Unity – True or Sham?*, London, 1939, p.7

important. The need for political office was not the only thing that drove the party. Ideas played an important role in giving Labour a programme of action, and also in the party's wider quest for an identity of its own that needed to show that Labour was neither a far left organisation like the Communists, nor simply another reformist capitalist party like the Liberals.

The second and third sections are more specific, as they offer overviews of the various socialist groups that either grew out of, or attached themselves to, the Labour Party. The second section looks at the growth of some of the more prevalent traditions in the Labour Party, paying particular attention to the groups and individuals representing these ideas. The Independent Labour Party, the Fabian Society, the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League are all included here.

The third section looks at the general impact the presence of the Soviet Union had on left-wing ideas in the post-war period. It then offers an overview of the developments in the Socialist League, as this was the most important left-wing group in the Labour Party in the 1930s. It specifically chose to remain inside the party, whilst trying to maintain an independent line concerning the USSR and the Popular Front. This caused the official party problems as it meant that a section of the party openly courted the Communist Party of Great Britain, thereby flouting party rules on links with communists which was seen as bad for its electoral credibility. The overall aim of the chapter is to explore the different ideas that shaped Labour's political thought, to ascertain what type of party Labour was and to place the Soviet experiment within the context of Labour's search for an identity.

1.1 Socialist purity or electoral pragmatism?

Socialism has always meant different things to different people, and this was especially true of the Labour Party in the 1930s, when the need for clarity in the face of confusion was perhaps more necessary than ever. In this decade, capitalism was perceived to be collapsing through economic incompetence and rightist extremism, and Labour again found itself countering attacks from its rival on the left, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). It is true to say that what one Labour activist saw as socialism meant authoritarianism to another member of the party or a betrayal of Labour's roots to someone else. The communist T. A. Jackson remarked in 1900 that there was 'an almost total failure to agree as to what "Socialism" meant in terms of concrete, specific, political practice.'² In his examination of Soviet socialism, Mark Sandle states that

Socialism has always been a diverse, complex, eclectic doctrine. Socialists have been classified as "utopian", "scientific", "reformist", "revolutionary". The socialist movement has divided into Social Democrats, Eurocommunists, Leninists, Maoists, Trotskyists, Marxists, Fabians, Democratic Socialists, eco-Socialists and so on.³

The term "Socialist" has provoked so much debate amongst scholars that a universal agreement 'has been almost impossible to achieve.'⁴ Yet while the Labour Party never came any closer than anyone else to solving this political equation, it evolved into an organisation capable of offering different perceptions of socialism that held the party together in periods of great uncertainty and upheaval. It offered a belief that one day the Labour Party would deliver its socialist promises, whatever they were.

Though the form of socialism was generally unclear, the method of achieving change was, in the main, accepted by the whole party, and it was this method that established

² Cited in J. Callaghan, *Socialism in Britain*, Oxford, 1990, p.27

³ M. Sandle, *A Short History of Soviet Socialism*, London, 1999 pp.9-10

⁴ Ibid, p.10

the boundaries of Labour's political thought. Ideologically, these boundaries were fluid and blended different theories of progressive thought into the loosely defined socialism of the Labour Party. But tactically they were set by the rigid acceptance that Labour was first and foremost a parliamentary party that fought elections in order to gain power through the parliamentary process.

Of course, this does not mean that Labour was simply an 'electoral machine', whose primary role was 'to win power at all costs within the existing constitutional structure'.⁵ The truth is more complex than that. Labour's identity was shaped by a struggle between the pursuit of power and the need to use that power when it obtained it. The factors that determined how it used it were the many socialist and progressive traditions that formed the party's political thought. Jose Harris asks whether Labour's quest was 'driven by ethical, religious and humanitarian imperatives' instead of, or as well as, the aforementioned need to win power 'at all costs'.⁶

This question is deep rooted in Labour's psyche. In his book about being a Labour Party activist during the Thatcher and Major years, John O'Farrell states that the 'battle between socialist purity and electoral expediency is constantly being fought within the soul of every Labour Party activist'⁷ and this has been a fact of Labour's politics since it formed its first government in 1924. The fact is, Labour was driven by both issues. It could not have been otherwise for a party with the 'emotional' history that Labour had. At times one was more important than the other and that one was generally the need for power. Labour is, after all, a political party and not a pressure group. The problem for socialists - either the politically active or the historian - stems from the fact that in order to gain that political power the party's ideas were often played down or changed. But there was more to Labour than solely wanting power -

⁵ J. Harris, 'Labour's Political and Social Thought' in Tanner, Thane and Tiratsoo *Labour's First Century*, p.9

⁶ Ibid

⁷ J. O'Farrell, *Things can only get better. Eighteen Miserable Years in the Life of a Labour Supporter 1979-1997*, London, 1998, p.208

it had a purpose once it was in power, although that purpose was never clearly outlined in the same way as parties whose ideology was unambiguous in its contours and content, such as the Russian Bolsheviks.

There were, of course, many differences between Labour and the Bolsheviks, one of which was the path to power. Labour struggled over the question of who to appeal to – workers alone, or the wider community? As a ‘labour’ party, the working class was obviously important, but leaders such as Henderson and MacDonald saw a role for the middle class as well, making it a much more inclusive, ‘one-nation’, party than the Bolsheviks. It also accepted that the parliamentary route was the best way to achieve political power, rather than advocating an abrupt change to the system. And this organisational structure helped to shape its political thought, as, for the most part, it favoured gradual reforms over revolutionary ideas. Overall, the aim was to change the existing system, but it was never specified whether that meant achieving a *socialist* goal or reforming capitalism in a more general way, perhaps even offering to manage capitalism better than other parties.⁸ This was the ground on which different ideas were debated, discussed and fought for.

At certain times in the party’s history, ideology was at least as important as its need for political Office in defining the party’s policies. This was the Labour Party’s dialectic. It was prevalent in the immediate post-war years and in the aftermath of MacDonald’s decision to form the National Government, when a consequence in both eras was that the party briefly moved to the left. Context was very important to the debates on ideas. When crises loomed, socialist ideas were the answer. When stability returned, socialist pragmatism (or gradualism) was restored to prominence.

⁸ It has been argued that this meant that Labour was more of a social democratic than specifically socialist party. For more on this debate see M. Wickham-Jones, *Economic Strategy and the Labour Party. Politics and policy-making, 1970-83*, London, 1996, and D. Howell, *British Social Democracy: A Study in Development and Decay*, London, 1976

Take, for example, the adoption of *Labour and the Nation* at the 1928 Conference. This pushed the party along its well-set gradualist lines, and it was possible for gradualism to be asserted by party leaders, as this was a stable period compared with what began a year later. After the Wall Street Crash in 1929, many more radical left-wing ideas were advocated than those outlined in this document. The tone of *Labour and the Nation* reaffirmed the party's reformist approach. It outlined a cautious advance, compensating those affected by Labour's policies and rejecting violence.⁹

While there was some debate about how far left the programme should go, a non-specific socialism that embraced gradualist, inclusive policies was accepted by the party. Its approach to foreign policy highlighted this, stating that '[t]hrough the League's machinery the Labour Government will co-operate with all other Governments to promote the world's common interests.'¹⁰ It is shown elsewhere that these interests did not necessarily mean the pursuit of socialism. Instead a stable world order was deemed necessary in order to fulfil one of the traditions that formed a part of Labour's socialist thought – the ability to improve people's lives within the existing capitalist system.

Such a position caused tension within the party as it offered little hope to members who wanted a more definite declaration of socialist intent. It was here that the Soviet Union helped to resolve and exacerbate some of these tensions. The role of the USSR depended upon how it was defined at any particular moment. The Labour Party defined the USSR as more than simply a 'united communist entity', breaking it down so that at different times it meant different things, depending on what the party needed it for at the time. Labour's own identity therefore shifted according to its concerns at the time, whether they were foreign policy, internal party politics or economic theory.

⁹ Labour Party, *Labour and the Nation*, London, 1928, p.6

¹⁰ Ibid, p.46

The notion of breaking the Soviet Union down into separate and easily usable parts is a prominent theme of this thesis.

The presence of the Soviet Union added another dimension to the 'radical' strand of Labour's political thought, which in itself complemented the many other traditions that made up the party's socialism. Within these traditions were justifications for the actions of all of the leaders, as they came from these traditions. Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald were members of the ILP; George Lansbury passed through the Social Democratic Federation and Clement Attlee spent some time in the Fabian Society. The other key figures in the movement's leadership, such as Arthur Henderson, Ernest Bevin and Walter Citrine all came from the trade union movement and in some way represented the labourist traditions of the labour movement.¹¹ Labour's identity could shift depending on whose voice was stronger at any given time. And this meant that whoever led the party could claim to be representing the 'true' ideas of Labour.

Labourism can, in some ways, be seen as something of a short-term action plan formulated by the trade unions that sought immediate improvements to members of the labour movement. This was the embodiment of Lenin's 'trade union consciousness' and from this came the understanding that cross-party alliances in parliament, especially with radical Liberals, was the best way forward. This was the aim of the movement, and not only when unionists such as Bevin and Citrine led it. It is shown below that cross party alliances were an important element of Ramsay MacDonald's leadership as well. It was this labourist approach which gave Labour a pragmatic side, allowing pragmatism to become something of an ideology in itself, thereby sharpening the conflict between ideological purity and practical necessity, and this conflict was heightened by the many socialist ideologists present in the party.

¹¹ For more on Labourism, see G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History*, London, 1997, pp8-14 and P. Allender, *What's Wrong with Labour?*, London, 2001, Chapter One

While the struggle between the pursuit of power and ideas became a vicious circle for Labour, it does explain why it used the Soviet Union as it did. Many of the ideas and traditions within Labour's past were seemingly being tried in the USSR, such as workers' control, scientific socialism through planning the economy and socialism being 'installed from above'. All of these represented an attack on capitalism, and thus found their way into even the most moderate Labourites' heart. But because of the need for electoral credibility and success, the various leaders could not be seen to be getting too close to the system established by a revolutionary party.

It was these two factors that dictated how the Labour Party responded to the Soviet Union as it searched for ideas to solve the problems that capitalism created. These factors also helped to define Labour's identity as it responded to the ideological challenges on the left, from the CPGB and the ILP, both of which used more revolutionary and therefore hostile language than Labour. Electoral responsibility and ideology became unequal partners in Labour's pursuit of power.

It has already been shown that this ideology was a vague interpretation of socialism, and that practical Labourites instead of the party's ideologists have been in a better position to control the destiny of the party. Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo state that Labour's 'operating principles have been defined and refined by a series of original and practical politician/thinkers, rather than abstract theoreticians.'¹² More often than not the practical Labourites won the support of the wider membership of the party, except on certain issues, which are discussed elsewhere. But it is true that, while electoral credibility and ideology dictated the way in which Labour responded to the USSR, the need to resolve the present problems and take care of day-to-day concerns, whether they were fascist, electoral or economic, dictated how it used it.

Both the Labour leadership and the rank and file turned to the Soviet Union for practical more than ideological reasons. While the ideological links between the

¹² Tanner, Thane and Tiratsoo, *Labour's First Century*, p.4

Labour Party and the Kremlin were enough to keep some party members in touch with the USSR, many activists favoured allying with the communists to fight fascism, and this was the basis for the united front campaigns in the 1930s. When in power, the leadership established diplomatic and trade links, and later described the news that the Soviet Union had joined the League of Nations as ‘a historic event.’¹³ This was important for the gradualists, as it meant that the USSR’s Foreign Ministry had joined an organisation that sought solutions through traditional and orthodox means, as opposed to the alternative, more revolutionary, Comintern. Of course in Britain, Labour’s leaders stopped well short of working with Communists. This was because the party feared detrimental electoral consequences such as being portrayed as a “Bolshevik” Labour Party and also for the simple reason that Labour *wasn’t* a “Bolshevik” Labour Party.

The ideas emerging from Russia influenced and inspired some Labour theorists and members, while they infuriated many leaders and other members. In a sense, Russia installed a mirror for the Labour Party to gaze into, offering a reflection of working socialism. This mirror sent back refracted images that *looked* like the socialism that Labour knew, but on closer inspection was quite different. Yet, despite the obvious differences in the two forms of politics, the USSR in the 1920s and, more importantly in the 1930s when capitalism appeared to be failing and fascism threatened the established order, continued to hold the party’s interest.

The answer to the question *why* did the Soviet Union hold such an interest can be found in the traditions of the party’s political thought, which were centred on socialism and its various interpretations. This made party members interested in many other models and examples of socialism. According to Stefan Berger, Germany partly fulfilled this role in the post-World War One era, although this was more in terms of how to organise the party as opposed to influencing Labour’s political thought. The

¹³ New Fabian Research Bureau, *Why the USSR Joined the League*, London, 1935, p.3

Labour Party, 'especially after 1918, increasingly came to look towards the SPD [Social Democratic Party of Germany] as an organisational model.'¹⁴

Soviet Russia played its part in the 1920s as well, and in the 1930s Labour had a number of different models to choose from, though not all of them were what could be termed "progressive". On the left was the Stalinist model in the USSR and the Social Democrats in Roosevelt's USA and in Sweden, and on the right was the corporatist-fascism of Italy and Nazism in Germany. All of these inspired Labour thinkers to muse over aspects of these systems. Yet no other model, with perhaps the exception of the New Deal in America, provoked as many articles in Labour Party newspapers or books written by Labourites, as the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

The Soviet model offered something for everyone in the Labour Party. Trade unionists were interested in workers' and trade union rights and workers' control; economists questioned the virtues and possibilities of a planned economy; feminists assessed whether Bolshevism would improve women's lives. Soviet socialism also promised freedom to Labour's libertarians, equality to egalitarian socialists and even socialism 'from above', which was of interest to the more elitist element in the party. By breaking the USSR down into easily understandable segments, Labourites only needed to know where to look to find what they wanted. And some of the questions asked by each section of the party addressed the wider issues of what type of party Labour should be.

The glue that united these constituents of the labour movement was a general belief in socialism, and without this common ideology, the USSR would have offered little more than a passing interest. The Soviet model could not have attracted the interest that it did in the Labour Party had there been no common ground. There were

¹⁴ S. Berger, " 'Organising Talent and Disciplined Steadiness': the German SPD as a model for the British Labour Party in the 1920s", *Contemporary European History*, 5, (1996), p.172

characteristics that both the British and Russian labour movements shared with each other, and also with the wider European socialist movement. Yet at the same time all countries had certain traits that distinguished their ideas from those of their comrades in other countries. It is difficult to deny that in the initial stages of the development of a working class or labour consciousness, national circumstances were influential in dictating how workers' movements would respond. Clement Attlee wrote that '[t]he British Labour Party is an expression of the Socialist movement adapted to British conditions. It is also a political movement of the British people in line of succession to many others'.¹⁵

This dispels the myth disseminated by Labour's opponents in the 1920s and 1930s that socialism in Britain was imported from abroad, that it was somehow not British. The Conservative Party took any opportunity they could to portray Labour as some kind of 'Soviet stooge'. One example of this was during the 1924 General Election campaign when Winston Churchill used scare tactics to woo the voters. He claimed that the 'Socialist Movement was from beginning to end a foreign minded movement. It had been lifted bodily from Germany and Russia.'¹⁶ Ramsay MacDonald however, claimed that the Independent Labour Party, which was Britain's first mass party of the working class, and which followed a socialist path of sorts, was

a product of British history and conditions. It is neither Russian, nor German, nor American. It found the radical movement as one ancestor, the trade union movement as another, the intellectual proletarian movement – Chartism and the earlier Socialist thinkers like Owen, Hall, Thompson – as another; the Continental Socialists – especially Marx – as still another.¹⁷

¹⁵ C. R. Attlee, *The Labour Party in Perspective*, London, 1937, p.20

¹⁶ *The Times*, 22 October 1924

¹⁷ R. MacDonald, 'Parliament and Revolution' in Barker, B. (ed.) *Ramsay MacDonald's Political Writings*, London, 1972, pp.239-40

According to MacDonald, the ideas and practices that governed the Marxists in Russia and Germany or the Syndicalists in France could also be found in the British labour movement, which strongly suggests that socialism is an international concept.

In stating that British labour found inspiration from various ancestors, MacDonald shows that there was not one single tradition that defined Labour's political thought. There were numerous movements and beliefs that influenced members' opinions, and this led to the emergence of a loose collection of socialist ideals rather than a distinct socialist philosophy. It was this lack of specific ideology, and the tactics chosen to pursue these aims, that ensured that Labour developed into a different type of party to the Bolsheviks, even though both grew out of the social democratic tradition.

Leninist tactics were alien to most British socialists. Labour openly contested parliamentary elections, preferring to use the ballot box to implement reforms rather than sweeping away the old regime via international insurrections. Labour was not a vanguard party that would *lead* the workers to socialist salvation. Electoral success was too important to the party, and one of its main aims was 'to organise and maintain in Parliament and the country, a definite and independent political party.'¹⁸ The parliamentary methods adopted by Labour set the party's boundaries. Even though the party had no rigid ideological blueprint about what it would do or how it would do it once it won power, it knew that such power had to be gained by participating in the existing framework. Therefore the ideas that were discussed had to be achievable through parliament.

However, the fact that there was no clear blueprint allowed socialism to mean many different things to Labour Party members, but every comrade was still united in a party that was able to house them all. It was this loose interpretation of socialism that

¹⁸ Labour Party, *The "Popular Front" Campaign: Declaration by the National Executive Committee*, London, 1939, p.1

held the Labour Party together when other European socialist parties split into socialist or social democratic parties and the communists. The Labour Party maintained a cohesiveness that bound most socialists together, irrespective of their different backgrounds.

Jean Goldie, a Labour Party activist from 1946 onwards, remembered that her branch 'used to sing *Jerusalem* at the start of the meeting and *The Red Flag* at the end of the meeting'¹⁹ and this encapsulates the very essence of the socialism of the Labour Party. At the beginning of a party meeting, members could sing a hymn whose words inspired belief in the idea that a new society was possible. At the end of the meeting the same members could sing a socialist anthem that removed religion from the equation, but shared its sentiments. The Labour Party was a hybrid of different political ideas that spanned the social democratic spectrum, from left to right, from revolutionary to reformist, from atheist to Christian. Labour MP Hugh Jenkins 'drew attention to the importance of Labour's tradition of a socialism drawn from many sources including John Wesley, Robert Owen and Karl Marx' saying that this was 'why the Labour Party has a collection of beliefs rather than a single dogma.'²⁰

The discussions that took place as socialists tried to identify Labour's socialism included arguments about the nature of internationalism, for parliamentary and revolutionary socialism, collectivism and planning versus the free market and egalitarianism and elitism. These debates played a major role in developing the non-specific socialism that defined the Labour Party's political thought, and the way in which the Soviet Union's presence influenced these debates is discussed later. However, the chapter now focuses on some of the other sources of these ideas in the political bodies that played a leading role in shaping Labour's ideas in the early part of the century.

¹⁹ Cited in D. Weinbren, *Generating Socialism: Recollections of Life in the Labour Party*, Stroud, 1997, p. 2

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.11

1.2 The Independent Labour Party

In 1893 the Independent Labour Party (ILP) was founded, and the emergence of the ILP was a decisive factor in the development of a parliamentary labour group, which became more necessary with the enfranchisement of manual workers in 1867 and 1884. The radicalism of the New Unions in the 1880s meant that workers desired more than that offered by progressive Liberals.²¹ The ILP was composed largely of trade unionists, and together with the other socialist parties such as the Fabian Society and the SDF, it offered a real alternative to the negotiation and conciliation that had guided workers' representatives until now. This could not happen without the ILP though. Neither the Fabians nor the SDF had the huge support of the working class that the ILP attracted in certain areas of the country.

One of the founding members of the ILP was Keir Hardie. Hardie has been described as a '[r]adical and a Gladstonian Home Ruler'.²² Indeed, he was rejected by the Liberals as a candidate, and when he entered parliament as a member of the ILP, he declared that 'I have all my life given an independent support to the Liberal Party...*I am in agreement with the present programme of the Liberal Party*'.²³ However, he was also a great believer in trade union activity, and hoped that a parliamentary labour group could further the cause of the ordinary worker.

Hardie's unionism pushed him towards socialism, which, according to Geoffrey Foote, had a '...labourist basis, in that he appealed to the almost instinctive assumptions of a trade union movement which found itself in a fundamental conflict with capitalist employers.'²⁴ However, Hardie opposed the Marxist concept of class war, yet, like the

²¹ For information on the radicalism of the 'New Unions', see T. Cliff & D. Gluckstein, *The Labour Party – a Marxist History*, London, 1988, pp.8-12 and James Hinton, *Labour and Socialism*, Massachusetts, 1983, Chapter Three

²² L. Macneill Weir, *The Tragedy of Ramsay MacDonald*, London, 1938, p.26

²³ Cliff & Gluckstein, *The Labour Party*, p.8 (their italics)

²⁴ Foote, *Labour Party, Political Thought*, p.43

Marxists, he believed that emancipation of the working class should come from the workers themselves. This lack of common ground did not stop Hardie from combining with Marxists, socialists and the Scottish Land and Labour League to form the Scottish Labour Party. This later became a constituent part of the ILP and thus made the organisational break with the Liberal Party. It also shows the inclusiveness that was at the heart of the British labour movement from the beginning.

Ramsay MacDonald was another ILP member who, like Hardie, was willing to form cross-party alliances with progressive politicians to further the labour cause. MacDonald also shared Hardie's belief that '...Liberalism was the true gospel'²⁵ and he spent most of the 1880s under the wing of the Liberals. He disliked Marxism and the concept of class war, favouring a more gradual replacement of capitalism with socialism while capitalism was strong. In 1905, he wrote that Marx's view on the class struggle was 'both inaccurate as to the facts it assumes and misguided as a guide for action'²⁶ continuing to say that '...any idea which assumes that the interests of the proletariat feel an economic oneness is purely formal and artificial'.²⁷

Socialism for MacDonald meant more than pursuing the interests of just one class, and this inevitably meant that future co-operation between all progressive forces would be possible. This tradition of cross-class alliances was clearly established early in the party's history, and with Ramsay MacDonald retaining a leading position within the movement for many years, he was in a good position to allow this to continue. This not only saw cross-party alliances being developed, such as Labour giving its support to Britain's role in World War One (ironically without MacDonald), but also progressive Liberals, such as those in the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), joining the ranks of the Labour Party after the war.

²⁵ Macneill Weir, *Tragedy*, p.27

²⁶ R. MacDonald, 'Socialism and Society' in A. Wright, *British Socialism: Socialist thought from the 1880s to 1960s*, Harlow, 1983, p.70

²⁷ Ibid

The ILP attracted political figures from all sides. Keir Hardie shaped the party's socialism through a mixture of Liberal thought and trade union activity, while Ramsay MacDonald displayed a practical side where cross-party unity was necessary. MacDonald believed in the existing political institutions as a means of change, while Hardie saw hope in the unions. But the left-Liberalism of these two influential figures left a long tradition, most noticeably a belief in parliament and the need to be practical when necessary.

1.3 The Fabians, the SDF and the Socialist League

The ILP was obviously not the only socialist party that shaped the ideas of the emerging Labour Party, although it was perhaps the most important at rank and file level. Its role in founding the Labour Party has an 'iconic status', as leaders such as Hardie 'gave the smaller organisation enormous prestige within the wider movement.'²⁸ But the Fabian Society perhaps had a bigger influence than the ILP in terms of the ideas the Labour Party developed after it was born in 1906.²⁹ The Fabians comprised middle class intellectuals such as the aforementioned Annie Besant, but the most famous adherents to Fabianism were Sydney and Beatrice Webb and the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw.

Fabianism is most famous for the idea of the 'inevitability of gradualness', which dictated the Labour Party's approach to changing society for nearly thirty years. This concept urged a gradual transition to socialism with the replacement of capitalist managers by socialists, reflecting Sidney Webb's Civil Service background. Fabian socialism focused on state control of utilities and industries, earning the label "Gas and

²⁸ G. Cohen, 'The Independent Labour Party. Disaffiliation, Revolution and Standing Orders', *History*, Volume 86, 2001, pp 200-1

²⁹ In 1900 the Trades Union Congress met with trades unions and socialist societies and established the Labour Representation Committee, which changed its name to the Labour Party after it entered parliament in 1906

Water Socialism.” However, the question of who actually *controlled* the state, rather than just managed its amenities, never entered the equation. In fact, it was better that the workers did not actually have a say in the running of the country, as this would only lead to chaos. With the emphasis on management rather than participation, Sidney and Beatrice were able to praise the USSR under Stalin for following Fabian socialist ideals.

This question over what role the working class should have in the construction of a new society proved to be one of the main differences between the ILP and the Fabians. The ILP’s views have been discussed. The Fabians adopted a contrary position, which is not surprising given Beatrice’s belief that ‘we [her and Sidney] personally belong to the ruling class’.³⁰ She had nothing but contempt for the working class, writing ‘[w]hat can we hope from these myriads of deficient minds and deformed bodies that swarm our great cities – what can we hope but brutality, meanness and crime’ and some years later spoke of ‘the colossal stupidity of the trade union rank and file’ and ‘those underbred and undertrained workmen’.³¹ The socialism of the Fabians had a distinctly elitist nature, and the fact that they espoused ‘permeation’ of the older and established parties caused great mistrust amongst working class leaders of the labour movement. The Fabian Society contributed much to the doctrine of British Socialism over a long period, and without doubt played a crucial role in shaping Labour’s political thought throughout the inter- and post-war years.

The final groups that influenced Labour in this period, though to a lesser extent than the ILP and the Fabians, were the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League. Both though left a legacy in the party that would remain in one way or another for many decades. The SDF established an organised Marxist wing of the British labour movement. Founded in 1884 by Henry Myers Hyndman, it has been

³⁰ Cited in Cliff & Gluckstein, *The Labour Party*, p.18

³¹ Cited in *ibid*

described by Eric Hobsbawm as 'the first modern socialist organisation of national importance in Britain',³² but he regarded the man himself as '...a jingoist, an anti-Semite and an imperialist'.³³

Hyndman was instinctively a Conservative who favoured a strong British Empire, and he had no time for Liberalism. He converted to Marxism after reading *Das Kapital* in 1881, although both Marx and Engels shunned him. His patriotism shaped his Marxism, and he 'saw socialist transformation as the best way of preserving Britain's world pre-eminence at a time when it was being challenged by the United States and Germany in particular.'³⁴ His 'Marxist terminology concealed a crude national chauvinism and a belief that socialism could be achieved by the existing state.'³⁵

Hyndman's Marxism, as was shown earlier, appealed to many radicals, and future Labour and union leaders such as Tom Mann, George Lansbury and Ramsay MacDonald were drawn to the SDF. However, the sectarian nature of the SDF was resented by some members, driving away such people as Mann, Eleanor Marx and William Morris. Engels commented that the SDF was 'purely a sect. It has ossified Marxism into a dogma and, by rejecting *every* labour movement which is not orthodox Marxism...it renders itself incapable of ever becoming anything else but a sect.'³⁶

The SDF was important in that it established the Marxist element in the British labour movement, and went on to join other small socialist groups in the British Socialist Party in 1911, which claimed a membership of 15,000 at its peak. Despite the sectarianism of its founder 'many SDF members did co-operate with members of other socialist groups in campaigns in the 1880s and 1890s'³⁷ which once again highlights

³² Cited in P. Adelman, *The Rise of the Labour Party 1880-1945*, London, 1972, p.5

³³ Cited in D. Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century*, London, 1996, p.15

³⁴ A. Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, Houndmills, 1997, p.9

³⁵ Foote, *Political Thought*, p.23

³⁶ Cited in *ibid*

³⁷ Thorpe, *History*, p.10

the tolerance that existed in British labour politics. It was also successful in 'providing a breeding ground for a succession of gifted working-class activists...and acting as the main progenitor of the British Communist Party.'³⁸

The Socialist League was founded in 1884 when a group of SDF members left to form their own body. The artist and poet William Morris is probably the best known member of the League, although he was joined by Marx's daughter Eleanor, while Engels advised the parliamentary socialists of the movement. The Socialist League did not outlive the 1880s and its membership never passed more than a few hundred. However, it contributed an ethical element to Labour's socialism that lasted for over one hundred years.

The socialism that was embraced by the League was somewhat eclectic. Max Beer noted that it

lacked unity of views and aspiration; some of its members had turned their backs upon the Federation, because they mistrusted Hyndman; others were convinced that...the object [was to] gradually educat[e] the working men to independent political action...³⁹

Beer claims that Morris was among the anti-parliamentarians who 'hoped to see society transformed into something quite different from what it was. They were looking for a revolution, for a radical change of the social institutions.'⁴⁰ Morris alone represented some of the different views of socialism that the League stood for. Beer saw him as a revolutionary, while Thorpe notes that Morris wrote 'a series of utopian works describing what a socialist society could be like [which] showed a spiritual side of socialism which was not really to be found with the SDF or the Fabians.'⁴¹ Working alongside Eleanor Marx and Engels, Morris also embraced Marxism. He helped to

³⁸ Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, p.15

³⁹ M. Beer, *A History of British Socialism*, London, 1948, p.253

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Thorpe, *History*, p.10

write 'a series of essays under the heading *Socialism: its growth and outcome*, [which] paraphrase[d]...the *Communist Manifesto*, but [were] based on English economic and political history.'⁴²

Yet it was to be the ethical socialism espoused by Morris that had the biggest influence in the Labour Party. This element to his socialism stemmed from his artistic background, as he attacked capitalism for being concerned only with the growth of industry to enable capitalists to pursue profit. Morris claimed that capitalism lacked passion. G. D. H. Cole suggested that 'Morris passed from art to socialism, because he saw that under capitalism there could be no art or happiness for the great majority...He saw clearly that, so long as men are in thrall to the industrial system, there could be no good art and no good life for the mass of the people.'⁴³ Cole points out the utopian nature of Morris' socialism, noting that '[p]erhaps he did not see so clearly the way out - that was less his business.'⁴⁴ In other words, he had identified the problem but not a solution.

The claim that capitalism was somehow not a just system, that it could not benefit ordinary people because it was soulless, became a fundamental element to Labour's socialism in the twentieth century. Socialists may not have been able to agree on where they were going or how they were going to get there, but there was a strong agreement that socialism was a more decent system and that capitalism was just wrong. This feeling was shown in a survey of the books that most influenced the new intake of Labour MPs in the 1906 and 1910 general elections. In 1906 the MPs did not choose *Fabian Essays* or *Das Kapital* members (only two ILPers cited Marx and Engels in the survey). 'The book chosen by easily the largest number of these high-minded working men was Ruskin's *Unto this Last*.'⁴⁵ This was a critique of the

⁴² Beer, *British Socialism*, p.256

⁴³ Cited in *ibid*, pp.257-8

⁴⁴ Cited in *ibid*, p.258

⁴⁵ *New Statesman*, 4 December 1998, p.26

classical political economy and 'the philosophy of individualism, which seeks to set free the economic man to pursue his own private interests through the profitable use of his capital.'⁴⁶

Labour MPs were, by now, more interested in establishing a more community-spirited system. Ruskin's claim that as an economic system, capitalism 'considers men as activated by no other moral influences than those which affects rats or swine'⁴⁷ suggests that the ethics and morality of a political system were just as important as the economics of that system. The importance laid upon ethics was seen in the politics of William Morris, but also stemmed from the religious background of many trade unionists and socialists. The union movement was born out of the Methodist Church, and by 1910, 25 MPs stated that religious texts were their guiding influence (10 said the Bible), and the importance of religion to Labour later influenced the debate on religious persecution in the USSR.

The many different strands of socialism in the 'broad church' that was the Labour Party influenced the political opinions of Labourites, but perhaps two played a more significant role in the formation of Labour's socialism than the others. The first was a belief that gradual progressive change was 'inevitable' once a Labour Government was elected, and the second was that Labour had to be a party with a mass membership, representing trade unions, socialists and other progressive political elements. This was in stark contrast to the Bolsheviks in Russia who favoured a small, tightly knit 'vanguard' party. Although this 'elitist' approach gave the Webbs reason to believe that the CPSU under Stalin was following Fabian leadership, there was no move to allow Labour to be led in such a way. One reason for this was the strength of the trade unions and their leaders who would not accept a passive role when being represented in parliament.

⁴⁶ J. Lewis, *The Life and Teaching of Karl Marx*, London, 1965, p.184

⁴⁷ Cited, *ibid*

Indeed, at times this led to a division between the middle class intellectuals and the working class leaders of the movement. Bevin never totally trusted the intellectuals, although he did get on well with G. D. H. Cole and Clement Attlee. Bevin saw the idealists as unrealistic at times, as is shown in a letter he wrote to Cole in 1935, after Cole had written to Bevin expressing his sadness at the rift that had developed between the 'intellectuals' and the rank and file in the party. Bevin replied

[y]ou see, the difference between the intellectuals and the Trade Unions is this: you have no responsibility, you can fly off at a tangent as the wind takes you. We, however, must be consistent, and we have a great amount of responsibility. We cannot wake up in the morning and get a brain wave, when father says 'turn' and half a million people turn automatically. That does not work and so we have to stand all the criticisms, ridicule and talk about 'right wingism' and 'leftism' and all the rest of it, and just go on with our work.⁴⁸

The coalition of interests was the foundation for Labour's growth as a political party. Of course, the party was not ruled simply by these ideas alone, and as circumstances changed – such as the enfranchisement of more people and the sharpening of the domestic and international class struggle – certain sections of the party became more interested in other ideas. But these different interpretations of socialism could not have found a home in the Labour Party had there been no tradition of them in the party's history.

1.4 The presence of the USSR in the post-war Labour Party

Despite the upheaval during and after World War One, the fundamental elements of Labour's political thought were not shaken. It still believed in the idea that the working class should be organised and that they should have parliamentary representation. This representation did not necessarily have to be by a labour party

⁴⁸ Ernest Bevin papers, MSS 126/TG/61195 TEMP 45 Modern Record Centre, University of Warwick [MRC]

alone, as the Fabians and some ILPers favoured an alliance with progressive politicians who were sympathetic to Labour's issues, and this approach developed into one that welcomed activists from different classes.

However, prior to the 1929 General Election some groups like the ILP began to exert more independence as some socialists searched for a more left-wing socialism. According to Gideon Cohen, the ILP 'began to define a clear strategy and policy of its own, formulated independently of the official Labour Party.'⁴⁹ Labour's hierarchy fought back though, pushing the ILP towards disaffiliation in 1932. The details of this are discussed elsewhere, but it led to the formation of the Socialist League as ILP members who did not want to leave Labour fused with Cole's New Fabian Research Bureau and the Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda (SSIP) formed a year earlier. While the Socialist League decided to stay within the official party, it caused the leadership problems as it grew ever closer to the CPGB, eventually calling for it to be allowed to affiliate to the Labour Party in an attempt to fight fascism.

Andrew Williams correctly states that the movement of socialists into different organisations meant that by the early 1930s there was a three way split in the Labour Party – the old left, the new left and the new right. George Lansbury represented the old left – mainly the pacifists in the movement. Cripps and Laski formed the new left – the bloc concerned with fighting fascism through organised working class struggle, and Bevin, Citrine, Dalton, and Morrison made up the new centre-right, and the leadership.⁵⁰

The term 'moderate leadership' is used to describe the men in Transport House who came to lead the labour movement. Between 1933 and 1935, they consolidated their position, and, after much internal wrangling, formed a quite cohesive, though not

⁴⁹ Cohen, 'The Independent Labour Party', p.201

⁵⁰ A. Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.213

completely homogenous, hierarchy. Ernest Bevin and Walter Citrine offered strong representation for the trade union movement, and with Dalton, Morrison and later Attlee, steered Labour along a course of gradualist and pragmatic change. This had important overtones for the party's international policy between 1931 and 1939, especially after 1935 when pacifism was rejected as a possible way of defeating fascism and it became a clear fight for influencing policy between the new left and the new right.

It was these two camps that defined Labour's political thought in these years, as they embodied the struggle outlined above, between ideas and pragmatism. The leadership favoured the more pragmatic line, placing electoral credibility above almost everything else, including the rise of fascism in Britain. The official party response to the suggestion that it should work with communists to make democracy safe was as fierce as the arguments from the left in favour of this proposition.

Yet this did not stop some of the moderate socialists openly advocating their support for certain Soviet policies and approaches to problem solving, as ideas were continuously put forward that often had a connection in some way with the USSR. While the SSIP was intended by Cole to 'propagandize practical socialist policies' and the NFRB carried out more detailed research into new policy areas⁵¹ both groups turned to the USSR for ideas. The SSIP primarily concerned itself with new ideas for Labour's economic policies, while the NFRB offered a more comprehensive analysis of the Soviet system with its *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*. Labourites who theorised in these groups, such as Cole, Bevin, Attlee, Dalton and D. N. Pritt, to name a few, contributed to the leftist progressivism that governed the thought of the party in the 1930s. It was only the more extreme socialist ideas, from parties like the Socialist League and the ILP, that were discouraged, and as these two groups were increasingly sidelined, Labour's political thought became more defined.

⁵¹ N. Ellison, *Egalitarian Thought and Labour Politics Retreating Visions*, London, 1994, p.4

Perhaps the main difference between the NFRB and SSIP on the one hand, and the Socialist League on the other, were their attitudes towards the USSR. The former groups were more concerned with exploring the nature of the political and economic system that governed the Soviet Union, with the intention of seeing whether any elements of the Soviet system could be adapted for 'use' in Britain. The Socialist League however, became somewhat obsessed with bringing the USSR's satellite, the CPGB, into a Popular Front of socialist parties in order to fight fascism. This issue was not debated by these groups alone, as the party leadership also addressed the same question - should the USSR be a teacher and a model, whilst being kept at a safe distance, or should it be an active partner in solving the world's problems? This, however, could lead to an encroachment upon Labour's ground from the CPGB. The way that Labour defined the USSR as more than simply a 'united communist entity', breaking it down into areas from which it could take and copy or reject and ignore ideas and practices, helped define Labour's own identity in a number of different ways.

In foreign affairs, Labour's leaders saw the USSR's role as no different from the other 'progressive' states. It needed to be brought into the League of Nations to help defend the stability and peace of Europe. Dalton and the other leaders did not place particular emphasis upon building a socialist bloc of states in order to achieve the party's objectives, but rather upon a collective comprising the anti-fascist states. However, Labour's long-term reason for this was to see right-wing aggression defeated so that the party's reforms could be made. This differentiated Labour from those who favoured returning to the status quo, and therefore the party's overall foreign policy can at least be seen to be 'progressive'.

In the other two main areas of policy that concern this thesis, Labour used the Soviet Union in a different way that had its basis in the shared ideology of socialism.

Concerning the party's internal party democracy, Labour reaffirmed itself as a parliamentary party that could not accept any revolutionary alliance, even though this was advocated by a section of its own organisation. Labour was definitely rejecting Soviet practice. However, in its economic thought, it was more than willing to embrace Soviet ideas on planning. This not only had a clear influence on the party's own notions of planning, but it also meant that Labour's identity was shaped by anti-capitalist ideas as the party sought a clear socialist alternative to the free market. It is perhaps in their economic thought that Labour's dealings with the Soviet Union can most clearly be termed socialist.

1.5 The Socialist League

The Socialist League was born out of the ILP's disaffiliation from the Labour Party. A. J. P. Taylor stated that '[t]he more intellectual members of the ILP refused to cut themselves off in this way and formed a new organisation, the Socialist League, designed to continue the work of the ILP in association with the Labour Party.'⁵² Andrew Thorpe notes that the aim of this body was to 'replicate the 'old' ILP within the Labour Party, and be a force for radicalism but not disloyalty.'⁵³ People like G. D. H. Cole, Stafford Cripps and Harold Laski were all members of the Socialist League, which filled the space on the left that the ILP had vacated.

Some members of the League saw the 1929-1931 Labour Government as a disappointing failure claiming that 'inevitability of gradualness' and elitism of the Fabians had been discredited. Members like Cole and Laski both still agreed that socialist change could come through Britain's institutions. Cole though, did not see a rationalisation of private capital and state banking as enough to achieve socialist goals 'because monopoly interests would retain the power to sabotage them; only

⁵² A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, Middlesex, 1976, p.432

⁵³ Thorpe, *History*, p.81

substantial state ownership of industry could remedy this defect.’⁵⁴ Cole saw a mix of parliamentary and industrial democracy as a way of ensuring that capitalists did not ‘steal’ power that they did not earn through elections. This was a common fear on the left after 1931.

Stafford Cripps saw the 1931 crisis as ‘the clearest demonstration of the power of capitalism to overthrow a popularly elected Government by extra-parliamentary means.’⁵⁵ Such consternation shaped the political attitudes of Labour socialists who were wary of a coup by the right because of the events of 1931 and the rise of fascism in Europe. Pimlott notes that ‘[t]he League, like the ILP and the CP, took for granted that capitalism was in decline and could only be saved by entering a new, fascist phase.’⁵⁶ Even Clement Attlee accused the National Government of pursuing policies that had more than a trace of fascism about them. In 1935, he criticised MacDonald for pursuing a philosophy that was ‘essentially Fascist.’⁵⁷

Kevin Jeffreys notes that the ‘newly formed Socialist League attracted much rank-and-file support with its advocacy of direct attacks on the capitalist system, fuelled by mass unemployment peaking at nearly three million.’⁵⁸ Support for the ILP must be seen within the context of the events of its time. At its height, it attracted 3,000 members and had 100 branches. This is clearly not an overwhelming number for an organisation that had the possibility of attracting a much wider audience within a labour movement that included an increasing trade union membership. But it was still quite substantial for a party that used openly revolutionary language and favoured closer ties with Communists – two aspects that set it well apart from the main Labour

⁵⁴ Cited in Callaghan, *Socialism in Britain*, p.129

⁵⁵ Cited, Foote, *Political Thought*, p.148

⁵⁶ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, Cambridge, 1977, p.65

⁵⁷ Attlee, *Labour Party, Perspective*, p.60

⁵⁸ K. Jeffreys, ‘The Attlee Years, 1935-55’ in B. Brivati and R. Heffernan (eds.) *The Labour Party A Centenary History*, Basingstoke, 2000, p.69

Party. However, the League also represented the elitist and intellectual strand in Labour's political thought.

As the international situation worsened, the Socialist League became more extreme. In 1933 Cole left to return to a Labour Party unencumbered by Marxist rhetoric. He felt that the political line the League was taking 'was certain to bring it into direct and unfruitful collision with the official Labour Party.'⁵⁹ Cole was, first and foremost, a loyal party member who sought to influence Labour's political thought and actions from within the party. But the extremism of the Socialist League meant that even long-term Communist Party members felt safe in joining it.

J. T. Murphy explained his decision in an article in the *New Clarion*. 'I am a revolutionary Marxist who is convinced that the working class of this country is facing an oncoming revolutionary crisis, in which the Labour Party, of which the Socialist League is a part, will be called upon to play a deciding role.'⁶⁰ Murphy believed that 'it is clear as daylight that the masses regard the Labour Party as the only serious opposition to the reactionary National Government.'⁶¹ He seemed to agree with Cole that the Labour Party could be won over to a socialist programme. The workers, he said, 'are demanding a Socialist solution to the crisis and becoming increasingly ready to put it to the test. This is reflected...in the internal life of the Labour Party itself and the whole Labour Movement.'⁶²

The Socialist League emphasised the strand of Marxist thought that was an important force in the party in the 1930s. In the climate of this decade, this strand of Labour's socialism was perhaps the only genuine contender from the left *inside* the Labour Party to the moderate leadership's crown. Yet the presence of an openly Marxist

⁵⁹ G. D. H. Cole, *Socialism and Fascism*, London, 1961, p.69

⁶⁰ *New Clarion*, 15 April 1933

⁶¹ *Ibid*

⁶² *Ibid*

fraternity that colluded with the CPGB actually helped the wider Labour Party to define itself as a more progressive, less distinctly socialist party. The official party leadership distanced Labour from the overtly left-wing socialism of the Marxists in the movement by clamping down on Communist organisations, and it ultimately expelled problematic left-wingers who did not toe the party line. Cripps found himself isolated on the left and was forced out 'for disloyalty to the Labour Party'⁶³ in 1939.

1.6 Conclusion

Since the day that the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, Labour's identity was partly driven by the need to prove that it wasn't a British version of Lenin's party. It did this by reaffirming its belief in electoral rather than revolutionary democracy, and also by attacking communist activity inside the party. This process saw the party use the USSR in both negative and positive ways. It discarded elements of Soviet socialism that it did not want. But it also accepted Soviet ideas as it developed its economic thought in the thirties. Its foreign policy fell somewhere between the two.

Labour's identity was also shaped by all of the different traditions that were present in the party's history, which meant that Labour's socialism could remain all things to all people. The party's socialism was eclectic where ideas were borrowed or inherited from a number of traditions and interpretations of socialist thought. These traditions included radical Liberalism, labourist trade unionism and different forms of Christian Socialism, and they lived side by side with a Marxist element from the inception of the party. And at some time in Labour's one hundred years, each one has found a voice in the higher echelons of the party depending on who led the party. This explains why Clement Attlee's government in 1945 could include members who had disagreed with the party line in the 1930s. The debates that took place in this decade formed the basis of the most left-of-centre government of the twentieth century. The

⁶³ Labour Party, *Socialism or Surrender? Labour Rejects the "Popular Front"*, London, 1939, p.1

political thought of the 1930s Labour Party was one of thesis and antithesis. The post-war Labour Government was the synthesis.

But the party's history dictated that it would remain interested in Soviet developments, as Russia had something to excite all strands of Labour's socialism. In the 1920s, workers' control was praised by left-wing trade unionists while the party leadership could support a less "extreme" Bolshevik Party that followed a more gradual market-based economic approach under the guise of Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP). In the 1930s, the bureaucracy-obsessed Webbs could revel in Stalin's 'socialism from above' while moderate economists accepted the notion of a planned economy along Soviet lines. Rank and file members who would ordinarily obey their party and have no truck with Communists began to call for a united front with the CPGB to fight fascism. The non-specific aims of Labour's socialism always allowed for interest in other models of progressive or socialist governments. However, the nature of *Soviet* Marxism – which became the dominant interpretation of this faith in the thirties – meant that it could not sit easily with a leadership that forged the party into a reformist and left-progressive party which believed that change had to come through parliament.

On the whole, the Labour Party's position on the Soviet question remained largely, though not completely, unchanged in the 1930s. In terms of foreign and economic policies, the images reflected in the Soviet mirror offered hopes to some members and alternate interpretations of socialism to others. To the moderates in the party leadership, the USSR was a crucial element in the process of stabilising the international situation, but certainly not to be used in determining Labour's socialism. One way or another the USSR helped define the political thought of the Labour Party in the 1920s and even more so in the 1930s. This was a positive influence in areas where the Labour Party could choose whether or not it wanted to associate with the USSR. Bill Jones notes that Labour could form a coherent foreign policy concerning

Russia, as it was sufficiently distant for Labour to be comfortable in offering support.⁶⁴

In the internal politics of the party though, Labour was much more hostile when it came to the Soviet Union and, more specifically, the Communist Party of Great Britain. Jones correctly asserts that Labour's relations with the CPGB should not be used as a barometer of its feelings towards Russia, as when the party rejected the CPGB's first application for membership, Labour leaders were 'passionately supporting Russia against Western intervention.'⁶⁵

It was not only the presence of a 'working model' of socialism in a far away country that would influence the political thought of the Labour Party, but the very real presence of proponents of that model not just inside the labour movement (CPGB members) but inside the Labour Party. These included respected figures who traded that respect for blind faith in the Soviet system, like the Webbs, and other influential personalities who tempered their admiration, favouring a more selective approach in their admiration for the USSR. One thing is definite though, and that is that it did not matter which strand of Labour's socialism an individual aligned themselves to, or whether they identified with the liberal tradition or the radical wing of the party's history, they had something to say about the Soviet Union.

⁶⁴ Jones, *The Russia complex*, p.9

⁶⁵ Ibid

CHAPTER TWO

Labour, the revolutions and the Kremlin

‘a new star of hope has risen over Europe.’¹

‘Russia has brought us down once. We can’t afford to let it happen twice.’²

These two quotes from the Labour newspaper *Daily Herald* in 1917 and from Arthur Henderson when he was Foreign Secretary in Labour’s second Government, represent how the different groups discussed earlier saw the Soviet Union. Those on the left of the Labour Party, with varying degrees of faith, believed that the Soviet system offered hope to the socialist movement. Right-wing Labourites however, had a more problematic relationship with the country, as their understanding of socialism was far removed from too many elements of the USSR’s regime. The experiences of government also influenced the attitudes of the moderates, as those on the right tended to be the members of the party who were chosen for Cabinet posts.

This chapter offers an overview of the history of Labour Party-Soviet Union relations between 1917 and 1931. It looks at the party’s reaction to the Russian Revolutions in 1917 and the period after these events prior to the first Labour Government, and highlights the different responses of various socialists and what this meant in terms of Labour’s philosophy. It then assesses Labour’s policy towards the Soviet Union when it was in government, looking at how the party’s policies were affected by its dealings with the Kremlin.

¹ *Daily Herald*, 24 March 1917

² Arthur Henderson to Hugh Dalton, cited in F. M. Leventhal, *Arthur Henderson*, Manchester, 1989, p.156

2.1 Rejoice at the fall of Tsarism

The end of Tsarist rule provoked great excitement in the Labour Party. George Lansbury claimed that if the promise that came with the revolution was fulfilled 'the political conditions of affairs in Russia will be very much more liberal and progressive than in any other belligerent country...'³ Philip Snowden agreed. Were the revolution to be successful in implementing the manifesto of the Provisional Government, which desired civil liberties and a democratic constitution, Snowden wrote that a '...revolution will be needed in this country to put us on a level of equality with Russia. We shall see then how sincere are the professions of sympathy of our own governing classes with the Russian Revolution.'⁴ H. N. Brailsford exclaimed that '[w]e have won Russia.'⁵

This section explores an important period in the evolution of Labour's political thought, as events in Russia appeared to show that the international scene was shifting away from repressive autocracy and empires, and towards a more progressive liberalism, as the quotes from Lansbury and Snowden above suggest. And there was a move away from the rule of capital towards more importance being placed upon the question of labour, as socialists, workers and peasants played an active part in ending Tsarist rule and socialists would join the Provisional Government. The question of what to do about the war also needed to be addressed, as Russian soldiers displayed their war-weariness by deserting the front lines. And it also needed to assess what to do once the Bolsheviks came to power.

From the very beginning the two wings of the party supported different sides in Russia. The right favoured the leading role of the Mensheviks – a party that many Labourites could liken to themselves. The left was excited by the activity of the

³ *Daily Herald*, 24 March 1917

⁴ *Labour Leader*, 29 March 1917

⁵ *Daily Herald*, 24 March 1917

workers and soldiers. Both wings though, looked on with interest as socialists were participating in an influential way in the new Russian Governments. Such a gigantic leap forward for the Russian socialist movement must have offered hope to British Labourites. Socialist parties and trade unions in Russia had not long been legal, and still suffered at the hands of the Tsar's secret police force. Yet now there were socialist representatives in the Russian Government. And if this could happen in a country where democracy was only just emerging then in Britain Labour could surely hope for a similar turn of events relatively soon. It had been present in parliament since 1906, and Britain, it was claimed, was a respected democracy with the Mother of Parliaments – a very different situation to that of 'backward' Russia.

The question of continuing the war was the cause of a split between the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional Government in Russia, and the same was true in the Labour Party. 'Most Labour men had been uneasy' wrote G. D. H. Cole 'at the war alliance with the reactionary Czarist [sic] Government; and the Revolution was hailed as a grand liberation for the consciences of Allied Socialists as well as the Russian people.'⁶ The inclusion of socialists in the Russian Government now inspired hope for a quick end to the war. The ILP, which had opposed World War One on pacifist grounds, supported the Petrograd Soviet's call for a negotiated peace with no annexations or indemnities, as this had long been the position of the ILP.

The British Government assessed the situation somewhat differently, fearing that socialists in power could destabilise the war effort or the country. George Buchanan, Britain's representative in Russia sent a telegram on 16 March 1917 stating that there was no chance of the old regime being reinstalled, and that 'the dangers to be feared lie in the direction of socialists and anarchy.'⁷ His letter two days later suggested that,

⁶ G. D. H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party from 1914*, London, 1948, p.32

⁷ PRO FO 371 2998

while the succession of the Tsar's son would have been more agreeable, the government should 'pursue a policy to strengthen the hands of the moderate party.'⁸

Labour politicians focused their attention on keeping Russia in the war, urging Russians to continue their war effort. Arthur Henderson's *A World Safe for Democracy* (1917) was characteristic of this opinion, and it outlined his long-term vision. He argued that the Russian contribution was necessary for more than just victory, claiming that some Allies judged the Russian Revolution by 'its immediate effect upon Russian military strength, and not from the point of view of its lasting and profound influence on the development of world democracy'.⁹ Some people, he claimed, were not concerned with such details of politics, of whether Russia was a democracy or an autocracy, as long as she stayed in the war. He argued that 'a democracy at war, if convinced of the righteousness of the cause for which it was fighting, would be a more reliable and longer-staying partner'.¹⁰

Henderson sent a telegram to the Russian workers urging them not to pull out of the war. 'We earnestly trust' he wrote, 'you will impress upon your followers that any remission of effort means disaster to the comrades in the trenches.'¹¹ However, Bruce Glasier, an anti-war ILP comrade of Snowden and MacDonald, offered a more internationalist message to the Russian people. 'We trust our Russian comrades will not believe that this message, with its stunted sympathy and pro-war obsessions, represents the extent of the sympathy and interests of the British Socialist and Labour Movement in the great revolutionary uprising of the Russian democracy'.¹² While this was not the opinion of the majority in the labour ranks, it demonstrates that there was

⁸ Ibid

⁹ A. Henderson, 'A World Safe for Democracy' in Bealey, F. (ed.) *The Social and Political Thought of the British Labour Party*, London, 1970, p.87

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ *Labour Leader*, 22 March 1917

¹² Ibid

still a feeling of the old socialist internationalism, dropped by the social democrats at the start of the war, being kept alive within the labour movement by the ILP.

The war and the Russian Revolution had pushed British workers leftwards, and this manifested itself in a remarkable meeting of over one thousand left-wingers in Leeds in June 1917. The *Daily Herald* sponsored the event, claiming that the meeting ‘...will hail the Russian Revolution ...the first representative gathering of the British Labour Movement to express unqualified approval of what the socialists of Russia have accomplished.’¹³

Among the 1,200 socialists who attended this conference were delegates from various left-wing bodies in Britain. It was significant that Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden represented the ILP, as these were, until the outbreak of the war, two of the Labour Party’s biggest names. They were also devotees to the parliamentary cause, so for them to be at a meeting celebrating the revolutionary overthrow of the old order in Russia is highly symbolic. The Labour Party itself however, was not present. Labour’s ruling National Executive Committee (NEC), the authority that oversaw party management between conferences, passed a resolution on 18 July stating that it had ‘...nothing to do with the Leeds Convention...’ and that ‘...no local organisation affiliated to the Labour Party ought to convene conferences which are not in harmony with the general policy of the party.’¹⁴ However, local labour parties, trades councils and women’s organisations joined the ILP, the Union of Democratic Control (whose members included radical anti-war Liberals) and the far-left British Socialist Party in Leeds.

The fact that the Labour Party was not present has led some historians to dismiss the importance of Leeds. Paul Adelman and Stephen Richards Graubard both argue this

¹³ *Daily Herald*, 2 June 1917

¹⁴ Cited in J. T. Murphy, *Labour’s Big Three, A Biographical Study of Clement Attlee, Herbert Morrison and Ernest Bevin*, London, 1948, p.53

point. Adelman claims that Ramsay MacDonald was embarrassed to be there, while the congress itself ‘...proved a resounding failure.’¹⁵ Graubard asserts that this was an unrepresentative meeting of the left because the official Labour Party was not present. He claims that this was ‘one of the great anomalies in British Labour experience.’¹⁶

Yet to claim that it was unrepresentative simply because the Labour Party was not there is to imply that the British labour movement had a very narrow base, and this is incorrect. Henry Pelling declared that ‘[t]he conference was a great success, for it was attended by delegates not only of Socialist party branches but also of trade-union branches and trade-councils.’¹⁷ He observed that the resolution urging the establishment of soviets in Britain ‘...was a revolutionary gesture and no more, but it signified the weakening of the existing ties of authority within the labour movement.’¹⁸

Adelman and Graubard dismiss too quickly the profound effect Leeds had on the labour movement as a whole. The composition was different to other Labour conferences, with a much wider audience from which to draw ideas. Snowden wrote

... it was not a caucus-ridden gathering, manipulated by officials and “leaders” but it was a spontaneous expression of the spirit and enthusiasm of the Labour and Democratic Movement. It was representative of all sections of the Labour and Socialist movement and of all shades of Democratic opinion.¹⁹

While members of the Labour Party such as Henderson were not there, MacDonald was present, and he had been the leader of the party until he resigned less than three years earlier. It is not true that he was embarrassed to be there. His speech praised the fact that the revolution had returned the initiative to the working class.

¹⁵ Adelman, *The Rise of the Labour Party* p.49

¹⁶ Graubard, *British Labour*, p. 19

¹⁷ H. Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, Harmondsworth, 1987, p.146

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ *Labour Leader*, 7 June 1917

...We congratulate the Russians on the Revolution without any reservations whatever...When the war broke out, organised labour in this country lost the initiative...Now the Russian Revolution has once again given you the chance to take the initiative yourselves. Let us lay down our terms, make our own proclamations, establish our own diplomacy, see to it that we have our own international meeting.²⁰

These are not the words of an embarrassed man, although they should be put into the context of the meeting. His speech was made to the euphoric mass of excited socialists in the hall, where other speakers made 'flamboyant speeches to the cheers or revolutionary shop stewards and other left-wing Socialists...'²¹ Indeed, the mood in the hall dictated the actions of everyone. 'Reacting to the mood of their audience, mild trade unionists talked like Bolsheviks and for a few hours, within the crowded hall, a socialist revolution in Britain seemed a viable proposition.'²² After Leeds, the mood of the party changed. Jones said that Leeds 'marked the catalytic effect which events in Russia were having upon Labour's thinking, particularly on foreign policy.'²³ Such revolutionary excitement did not last long, but this certainly provoked a leftwards shift in the movement and workers became more militant in the summer of 1917.

The war years saw trade union membership rise from four to six million, and days lost from strikes rose from almost zero at the beginning of the war to six million by the time it was over. The attitude of thousands of workers had been radicalised by the revolution. In May 1917 the *Labour Leader* wrote of the 'Magnificent Labour Demonstrations in Britain' and called Glasgow the 'British Petrograd'. It said that the

Greatest Labour and International demonstrations ever known in Glasgow, if not in the United Kingdom, took place without let or hindrance, and free from even the hint of opposition. Glasgow and Petrograd, the Clyde and the Neva, were linked together on Sunday in the bonds of International Brotherhood.²⁴

²⁰ *What Happened at Leeds* – Report published by the Council of Workers and Soldiers' Delegates, London, 1917, p.6

²¹ Jones, *The Russia complex*, p.vii

²² *Ibid*, p.3

²³ *Ibid*, p.1

²⁴ *Labour Leader*, 10 May 1917

Despite the wave of militancy, the Labour Party retained its roots in reformist politics and parliamentary tactics, and Lenin's seizure of power did little to change this. The response to the second revolution was less enthusiastic from Labourites than it had been for the first insurrection. The majority view was that Lenin would not keep power. The *Manchester Guardian* wrote little about the Bolsheviks coming to power. While it carried stories about the 'Maximalist Manifesto: All things Promised to Soldiers and Workmen'²⁵ it did not really pass judgement. The paper saw no long-term future for Lenin's regime, and the Petrograd correspondent said that Lenin was in a similar situation to Kornilov, in that he 'seems on the point of being overthrown chiefly by the spontaneous uprising of the democracy itself.'²⁶ Philip Snowden agreed, noting that '[f]or a time the Extremists have captured the Government.'²⁷ He obviously did not expect the Bolsheviks to be in Government for too long.

The general feeling was one of sadness 'that the frail flower of Western-style democracy should have been crushed so soon...'²⁸ The Webbs found the aggressive nature of Bolshevism alien to their approach, and J. R. Clynes expressed the trade union view, describing the Bolsheviks' methods as 'vicious, unjust, tyrannical and dictatorial'.²⁹ H. N Brailsford noted with sorrow that the moderates could not succeed. He wrote that the 'Rise of the Maximalists' led to the victory of the 'uncompromising party of social revolution' because 'the moderates were unable to win peace' while the Russian people became more desperate for 'bread and boots and fuel.'³⁰

Labour's reaction to the Bolsheviks' seizure of power failed to live up to Lenin's hopes that the socialist revolution would spread to industrialised countries such as Britain. While this did not happen, Labour did adopt a more left-wing position. A new

²⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 10 November 1917

²⁶ *Ibid*, 12 November 1917

²⁷ *Labour Leader*, 15 November 1917

²⁸ Jones, *The Russia complex*, p.4

²⁹ Cited in *ibid*

³⁰ *Daily Herald*, 17 November 1917

constitution was drafted in 1918 by moderate party reformers such as Henderson and Sidney Webb. To this constitution was added Clause Four, Part IV, the clause that caused the most hope or the most distress for Labour Party members, depending on which wing of the movement they stood.³¹

Clause IV can be interpreted in different ways. The clause undoubtedly represented the Labour Party's shift to becoming a socialist party, capable of attracting all types of socialist. Yet Marxists argue that this marked '*the conversion of the Labour Party into...a mass reformist party* distinct from the two openly capitalist parties...[the clause was] *a conscious means of staving off the revolution.*'³² There is no doubt that leaders like Henderson and MacDonald hoped to develop the foundations of a true 'people's party', which relegated the importance of class in favour of the nation. The problem with trying to marginalise the party's proletarian base was that 98% of the Labour Party's membership came from affiliated trade unions.

Cliff and Gluckstein's Marxist critique is not the only way of interpreting Clause IV. Geoffrey Foote argues that this was the ideas of British socialism emerging over the three decades in the forms of Labour Marxism, Fabianism and Ethical Socialism 'into an integral whole. They were *supplement* to, not a replacement of, the labourism of the trade union movement.'³³ While both arguments are persuasive, the timing of the redrafting of the party's programme lends support to the Marxist claim. Yet the adoption of *Labour and the New Social Order* at the eighteenth Labour Party conference suggests that Foote's assertion is correct for the *whole* party, representing the continuation of the general move to the left that began after March 1917. Drafted by Sidney Webb, *Labour and the New Social Order* outlined ideals such as guaranteed

³¹ Clause IV of the Labour Party's constitution: 'To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry, and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production'.

³² Cliff and Gluckstein, *The Labour Party*, p.72 (their italics)

³³ Foote, *Political Thought*, p.71 (his italics)

employment, nationalisation, social welfare and education for all. Progressive thought in the Labour Party had become decidedly socialist.

One aspect of this socialism was a belief in the national sovereignty of a country. This was evident in MacDonald's writings about non-class based socialism and socialism for the whole community. In the 1920s and 1930s, Labour had to defend Britain (and itself) from Communist propaganda, which was seen as Soviet interference. Yet in 1918 the majority in the labour movement, after some initial misgivings, lent its full support to the notion that Russia should be allowed to follow its own path, and even the most moderate socialist defended the citadel of revolutionary socialism.

In March 1918, the Bolshevik leaders of Soviet Russia negotiated a separate peace to end Russian involvement in World War One. British attitudes to this development ranged from indignation from Tories, angry at Russia's betrayal, to disappointment in the trade unions that Russia had not stayed to continue the fight. Yet the Labour Party sympathised with the Russians for their predicament. Leaders sent encouragement instead of condemnation. Henderson sent a message to the Russian people in the *Daily News*.

In the hour of Russia's agony, the organised workers of Britain would wish me to send a message of sympathy to their Socialist comrades. In the moment of total crisis in the fortunes of the Revolution, British Labour proclaims to the Socialist and Working Class parties of Russia its undiminished faith in their eventual triumph...the sacrifices which Russia has made for peace and freedom will not have been made in vain.³⁴

Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden made similar proclamations and this was the start of Labour's campaign to permit Russia to solve her own problems and choose her own government and destiny. The labour movement was not immediately united in

³⁴ Cited in Graubard, *British Labour*, p.55

this sentiment, but it soon rallied to the cause of stopping the intervention and promoting the recognition of Soviet Russia in the post-war era.

Members of the newly formed Advisory Committee on International Questions (ACIQ), which was established to study international affairs and to make recommendations to Labour's NEC and the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), offered this advice on the question of intervention:

...we express no opinion for or against the Soviet system, we consider that the Labour and Socialist Parties of the Alliance ought to exercise a special vigilance in preventing the use of Allied forces to favour the Russian counter-revolutionary parties.³⁵

The *New Statesman and Nation* agreed, stating that it was time to end the 'self imposed silence which we have observed with regard to the British Government's attitude toward Russia', shrinking 'from the responsibility of taking a strong line in the question.'³⁶

However certain we may be that the Bolsheviks' experiment in "catastrophic socialism" will fail, it is not our business to stop it...we have neither the duty nor even the right to suppress it merely because we dislike it and to kill British soldiers in the operation.³⁷

This point about not attacking the Russians simply because the British Government did not like the new regime was also made by Ernest Bevin, leader of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) and by no means a Communist. The Tsars, he said

have murdered thousands and we have not interfered – but if a peoples' revolution takes place we appear to be called upon, according to the policy of the last three years, to stamp out a

³⁵ MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/1403

³⁶ *New Statesman and Nation*, 21 December 1918

³⁷ Ibid

“terrible menace”. This is a principle that Labour can no longer stand idly by and see develop.³⁸

Attacks from the Conservatives forced Labour to defend Soviet Russia. Jones declared that ‘the hard pressed Bolsheviks seemed to symbolise the beleaguered spirit of socialism in Europe, and social democrats firmly identified the Bolsheviks as being on their side’³⁹. Labour opinion rallied to the cause of Soviet Russia in the face of attacks from Conservative critics. ‘Sympathy gave birth to an enthusiasm which acted as an antidote to doubt’.⁴⁰

Philip Snowden and Ramsay MacDonald were among those who called for immediate recognition of the Bolshevik Government. Their cause was not furthered by the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War. Snowden criticised both the Liberal leaders who stayed silent on the issue of intervention and the official Labour Party for offering ‘no word of protest against an act which is as unjustifiable as the German invasion of Belgium.’⁴¹ He continued to say that its purpose was to overthrow the social revolution in Russia ‘in the interests of the capitalist and imperialist classes.’⁴² The intervention was often seen as an attack on Russia on behalf of the powers of finance capital. It was dictated by no other motive ‘than to protect the financial interests of foreign investors and to overthrow a form of government in Russia which threatens the interests of property and privilege’.⁴³ Labour Conference stated that the ‘interests of financial capital’ should not extinguish the spark of socialism.⁴⁴

Such strong support in favour of the right of Russians to choose their own government reached its peak in May 1920, when the London dockers, encouraged by their leader Ernest Bevin, refused to load the *Jolly George* ship. The cargo included munitions

³⁸ Cited in Murphy, *Labour's Big Three*, p.77

³⁹ Jones, *The Russia complex*, p.5

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.6

⁴¹ *Labour Leader*, 8 August 1918

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid, 26 December 1918

⁴⁴ *Labour Party Conference Report 1918*, p.156 (From here referred to as *LPCR*)

bound for Poland to be used against the Red Army. The strike lasted until 12 May when the dockers won their fight and the ship sailed without the munitions. This was the finest hour of the "Hands Off Russia" campaign – a committee supporting Russia's right to national self-determination without interference from outside. Prominent trade unionists in the movement issued a manifesto that demanded that 'the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, and the Executive Committee of the Labour Party, should convene a National Conference...in order to declare a National 'down-tools' policy of 24 hours to enforce peace with Russia'.⁴⁵

J. H. Clynes summed up the trade unionist attitude after the *Jolly George* victory.

During the past few weeks we have gone through what is, perhaps, the most momentous period of the Trade Union and Labour Movement in our long history...which found for the first time, a united and determined working class effort to challenge the existing order of Parliamentary Government.⁴⁶

He continued:

Our action regarding Russia does not carry with it an acclamation of the Soviet method of government, and many of those who advocate a Russian peace do not subscribe to Soviet methods. We can, by unity and by the exercise of our political powers, determine our own form of Government, and if the Russian people prefer the Soviet system it is their business.⁴⁷

The dockers' decision sent a clear message to Lloyd George's Government. They would not tolerate British involvement in the blockade and intervention of Russia, nor would they support the continuation of military action in Europe. A combination of negotiations with the Bolsheviks, once Lloyd George realised that they were winning the Civil War and would remain in government, and industrial agitation from the British labour movement, helped to end British armed intervention in Russia.

⁴⁵ Cited in W. P. & Z. Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations*, London, 1943, p.151

⁴⁶ Cited in Murphy, *Labour's Big Three*, p.77

⁴⁷ Cited in *ibid*, p.79

2.2 The Internationals

While Labour was arguing for the Russian people to be allowed to work out its own problems, a new organisation was born which forced Labour to re-evaluate its policy towards Russia. The creation of the Third, or Communist, International (Comintern), meant that Labour had to develop a twin-track approach to Soviet Russia, that incorporated Russia's right to national sovereignty and the inclusion of Russia on a pragmatic basis into the party's foreign policy, whilst denying political air to the offshoot of the Comintern, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). The establishment of the Comintern helped define Labour's attitude to the Soviet Union in this period, and also Labour's own socialism. It forced it to reassert its parliamentary rather than revolutionary approach to winning power, to ensure that it did not get close enough to either the CPGB or the USSR to allow its enemies to portray it as a "Bolshevik" Labour Party.

The formation of the Third International brought members of the British Labour Party into direct contact with Russia and Russian affairs. Such contact was evident when the CPGB applied to affiliate to the Labour Party in 1920. However, there was never any serious possibility that the CPGB's application could be accepted. It was part of the Comintern, whose revolutionary socialism was alien to the parliamentary gradualism of the Second International – the body to which the Labour Party was affiliated. Both Internationals rejected each other's approach, which therefore guaranteed that Labour could not allow the Communists into its organisation.⁴⁸

The reconvening of the Second International by the social democrats of Europe and the creation of the Third International by the Marxists left a vacuum which was filled by those who were left of Labour but not as extreme as the Bolsheviks. The Vienna

⁴⁸ For more specific details on the Internationals, see Graubard, *British Labour*, Chapter 9; R. Palme Dutt, *The Internationale*, London 1964; E. H. Carr, *The Twilight of the Comintern 1930-1935*, London, 1982 and A. Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow 1920-43*, Manchester, 2000

Working Union of Socialist Parties, or the “Two-and-a-Half” international as it became known, was the home for the parties that joined neither the old or new bodies. This International remained neutral over the question of reformist and revolutionary methods, of the Soviet and parliamentary approach. Still though, Ramsay MacDonald hoped that the internationalists in the movement could unite ‘those who were divided without good cause.’⁴⁹

The Labour Party saw the Comintern as ‘absolutely doctrinaire’⁵⁰ and exclusive to those who ignored the historical, political and economic conditions of individual countries. The all-encompassing doctrine of the Comintern that rejected the importance of national histories and circumstances would never sit comfortably with Labour’s one-nation socialism. MacDonald wrote that ‘there are various roads leading to the same trysting place; that the Russian comrades may come one way and the British come another way.’⁵¹ ‘A tactic which claims universal conformity as a characteristic’ he said, ‘is self-condemned.’⁵² In 1922 MacDonald again criticised the Comintern.

From the very beginning I have taken the view that the Third was divided so deeply from the main Socialist movement, in temperament and methods that it had to be regarded not only as hostile, and no sloshy sentiment of brotherly unity made me blind to what I considered to be the facts that ought to dominate our attitude.⁵³

The CPGB in the 1920s concentrated on denouncing the reformism of the leaders of the British Labour Party, but simultaneously attempted to fulfil Lenin’s plan of infiltration into the labour movement. In 1924, Trotsky even briefly considered the left-wing of the Labour Party to be a more viable option in spreading the revolution westwards. Ronald Segal notes that members of the TUC delegation in Moscow in

⁴⁹ J. R. MacDonald, *Wanderings and Excursions*, London, 1925, p.239

⁵⁰ *Labour Leader*, 8 April 1920

⁵¹ MacDonald, *Ramsay MacDonald’s Political Writings*, p.239

⁵² *Ibid*

⁵³ MacDonald, *Wanderings and Excursions*, p.238

1924 'revealed a readiness for closer ties with the Soviet regime' and therefore a 'revolutionary alliance with militant labour in Britain glimmered before the Soviet leadership: promising a nearer and more credible prospect than the tiny Communist Party there could provide, of storming capitalism in its historic citadel.'⁵⁴

It is unlikely that the possibility of the Labour Party being won over to revolutionary socialism was ever seriously entertained by any of the leaders. But given what he was led to believe by the delegates, it is not surprising that Trotsky contemplated the idea, especially as the CPGB failed to make any serious gains in working class support at Labour's expense. Of course, for the rest of the decade the CPGB attacked the Labour Party more ferociously than it attacked the Tories, having abandoned any hopes of a CPGB-Labour Party pact as unrealistic. Bill Jones correctly notes that such Leninist propaganda in the 1920s only pushed the 'traditionally loyal British trade unionists to even greater loyalty' as leaders realised that an effective way to counter Bolshevik propaganda was to claim that the CPGB was 'a Trojan horse for sinister Russian influence.'⁵⁵

This approach was characterised by the Comintern's 'Class against class' policy, which saw the CPGB denounce social democracy as 'social fascism'. Although the Comintern did not argue that the Labour Party was a social democratic party yet, it claimed that Labour was degenerating into one and therefore lying to British workers about the party's *true* aims. This period in Labour-Communist relations formed the starting point for most of the debates about unity against fascism in the 1930s.⁵⁶ By then the Comintern and the CPGB had turned its attention to the ILP after its disaffiliation from the Labour Party and in 1935 the Comintern Central Committee

⁵⁴ R. Segal, *Tragedy of Leon Trotsky. Traitor, Hero or Prophet?* Harmondsworth, 1983, p.291

⁵⁵ B. Jones, *The Russia complex*, p.8

⁵⁶ For more on this area of Comintern politics, see J. Callaghan, *The Far Left in British Politics*, Oxford, 1987, pp36-38 and Thorpe, *Communist Party, Moscow*, chapters Six and Seven

held a meeting concerning the United Front and the Labour Party. The decision taken on the Labour Party was that

[w]e are faced still with the gravest responsibility of any section of the C.I. We are faced with the responsibility that this bunch who control the reformist movement in this country are now the chief obstacles to any tremendous advance.⁵⁷

Labour's attitude to the new Internationals highlights its overall approach to reform as it demonstrated that, even though the party had moved leftwards in the post-war era, it had retained its faith in changing society through the existing order. W. P. Maddox suggests that the decision by the Labour Party to 'stand by the moderate and innocuous Second [International], rather than consenting to be drawn under the red banner of Moscow' showed that it

retained its faith in the ultimate perfectibility of the existing structure and machinery of international society. Instead of plotting to use the political and economic crisis as opportunities for revolution, the British sought to ameliorate them internationally; instead of condemning the League of Nations as essentially an implement of capitalism, they realized its value and sought to improve it.⁵⁸

Labour's socialism continued to be based upon the premise that change could come through reform rather than through a violent overthrow of the system. But by the early 1920s, the socialism of the post-war Labour Party had developed into a more defined, though not clearly distinctive, socialism, and this development owed a lot to the events in and after October 1917. Labour adopted a socialist constitution in which a direct response to aggressive Bolshevism can be seen in Clause IV. The party re-embraced internationalism, although the pre-war talk of 'General Strike Second International'

⁵⁷ RGA 495/100/1001

⁵⁸ W. P. Maddox, *Foreign Relations in British Labour Politics*, Massachusetts, 1934, p.153

internationalism disappeared. Labour's new interpretation focused more on inter-governmental relations and the protection of national sovereignty than a reliance on expressing solidarity with workers in other countries. This latter focus still concerned the party, but the means of change had altered as Labour gave its full support to the development of the League of Nations. While this reflected Labour's gradualist approach to change, it also emphasised the difference between the reformists and the revolutionaries in international affairs.

The final reaction from the labour movement was the TGWU's flexing of its industrial muscle, inspired by the need to protect the revolution from Western intervention and culminating in the *Jolly George* affair. The influence of both revolutions was evident, and they shook Labour's socialist thinkers into questioning the fundamentals of their doctrine, and led them to embrace a slightly more defined socialism. Of course, this is not to suggest that the party thinkers had converted in any way to the aggressive socialism of Lenin. A. J. P. Taylor comments that in the 1920s, 'the unions had been the instruments of class war, and the Labour party had been more moderate, particularly under the leadership of MacDonald.'⁵⁹ But it is significant that the "working socialism" of Soviet Russia began to shape Labour's socialism, and in Labour's more introspective moments, the Soviet Union became a gauge by which it could measure its own socialism. And at times Soviet socialism fed into Labour's formation of foreign and economic policies when it was both in and out of government.

2.3 The first Labour Government and the USSR

Labour formed its first government in 1924 and second government in 1929. The first one lasted less than a year and the second less than its full term. Yet within these administrations, Labour was able to not only make a pro-Soviet foreign policy a

⁵⁹ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, Harmondsworth, 1976, p.429

fundamental part of its wider goals, but also successfully bring the USSR back into world politics. This was largely due to the single-mindedness of MacDonald in the first government and the skill of Henderson in the second. The main thing to notice about the nature of this pro-Soviet policy was that it was largely based on a practical need rather than a shared ideology. This section shows how, in Labour's first period in Office, the Soviet Union was used as a means of resolving problems.

Of course, socialism linked Labour and the Communist Party, and despite the evidence before them, Labourites must have hoped that by bringing Russia into world politics through traditional means such as trade agreements and the exchanging of ambassadors, some of the more militant aspects of Bolshevism would disappear. As shall be shown, they were heartened when the more extreme Communists were replaced by moderate ones and in the long term this approach appeared to be vindicated as the USSR joined the League of Nations in 1934. But it was not a shared belief in socialist ideology that initially brought the two parties together. This had more to do with MacDonald's pragmatic approach to solving Britain's post-war problems than extending Labourist or Marxist politics around the world – Soviet Russia was an untapped market with huge potential. Unlike many in the Labour Party who saw 'the new Russia through mists of idealistic and romantic illusion',⁶⁰ MacDonald's motivating factor for a progressive attitude towards the Communist State was practical rather than ideological, showing that the USSR could be a resource by which Labour could maintain power.

MacDonald took the post of Foreign Secretary as well as Prime Minister, ensuring that he had full control over international issues. He offered recognition to Soviet Russia without consulting his Cabinet, believing that any delay through consultation with his colleagues or indeed other powers may have meant a three month wait due to the dispersal of the Congress of Soviets on 2 February 1924. By giving recognition, he felt

⁶⁰ P. A. Reynolds, *British Foreign Policy in the Inter-War Years*, London, 1954, p.62

that it had been possible to secure the acceptance not merely of Georgy Chicherin and officials at the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (Narkomindel) in Moscow, but also of the representatives of Soviets of all the Russias, who sent a 'very cordial telegram of acceptance.'⁶¹ The fact that Mussolini's Italy was also on the verge of being the first country to officially recognise Russia also played a major part in this decision. The ILP's *New Leader* enthusiastically greeted the *de jure* recognition of 1 February with enthusiasm. It claimed that it should have been done years ago and rejected the claim in *The Times* that it was only a *sort* of recognition, arguing that '...recognition was precisely the instrument necessary for the efficient adjustment of details'.⁶²

The official Soviet view appears somewhat contradictory. *Pravda* wrote that England was '[o]n the path to full recognition of the USSR' as '[t]he Working Masses of England demand immediate recognition.'⁶³ Yet Maksim Litvinov, the deputy Commissar for Foreign Affairs, told *Izvestiya* that the British Government had recognised the USSR in the only way possible – namely unconditionally and unreservedly. He praised MacDonald, saying that he not only understood the diplomatic problems of the Soviet Government, but that he had come to an appropriate conclusion.⁶⁴ He went on to say that '[h]aving conceded under the pressure of workers and radical circles, MacDonald finally refused all of the preliminary negotiations and gave unconditional recognition.'⁶⁵ This was not strictly true. Whether radicals and left-wingers in the Labour Party wanted full recognition for Russia did not matter. MacDonald had wanted Russia to be officially recognised for years.

On the whole, Litvinov offered a positive interpretation of MacDonald's actions. However, while his response represented Narkomindel, Labour still had to be aware of

⁶¹ PRO CAB 23/47

⁶² *New Leader*, 8 February 1924

⁶³ *Pravda*, 1 February 1924

⁶⁴ *Dokumenti vneshney politiki SSSR*, Vol. VII, Moscow, 1963, p.66 (from here Dok. vne. pol)

⁶⁵ *Ibid*

the Comintern's position. Karl Radek, the ambitious international revolutionary, highlighted the contradiction in Soviet foreign policy. In a long interview in *Pravda*, Radek criticised the conditions placed upon the Soviet regime, which contradicted what Litvinov told *Izvestiya*. Radek said that England stood at the head of the counter-revolutionary campaign against Soviet Russia. English imperialists 'offered the Soviet Government recognition in return for a rejection of all the economic gains of the October Revolution.'⁶⁶ Accepting these conditions, he claimed, would see Russia paying its debts and compensation to foreign capitalists and therefore allow such capitalists to 'exploit the great wealth of the country, as yet uncultivated.'⁶⁷ He claimed that the Labour Party wanted to save capitalism, just as the German social democrats tried to in 1918. 'Recognition for the Soviet regime is for them a means of struggle against unemployment and against dangers threatening England and France.'⁶⁸ For Radek the political significance of recognition by most of the European powers 'signifies that all attempts to extract from us material concessions, in the end, were a failure. The recognition convinces us that we not only exist, but that we will exist.'⁶⁹

The different positions taken by the different Communist bodies shows how difficult it was for Labour to negotiate with Soviet politicians. The official view demonstrates that the Soviets, while obviously more radical than the Labour Administration, knew that they had to deal with Britain in something of a "traditional" manner. The reaction of Radek and the Comintern shows that Labour also had to take into account a more extremist point of view from the same side. The safest approach for MacDonald was to negotiate with the Soviet Government without the interference of ideology – to secure a deal that would be acceptable to the British electorate as a whole.

⁶⁶ *Pravda*, 3 February 1924

⁶⁷ *Ibid*

⁶⁸ *Ibid*

⁶⁹ *Ibid*

In April the Anglo-Soviet Conference took place, opening with MacDonald expressing his satisfaction at the fact that the Soviet delegates were present. He told them 'I have, as you know, advocated the recognition of your Government during the past few years, and it is therefore a source of personal gratification to me to receive you here to-day'.⁷⁰ He understood what the Soviets wanted from his government – political countenance and financial assistance – and that 'We want neighbourliness and recognition of international obligations.'⁷¹ Khristian Rakovsky, in charge of the delegation, gratefully thanked the Prime Minister for his party's support. 'The highest governing body of the nations constituting our Union has emphatically declared in its resolution that close co-operation with Great Britain is one of the foremost aims of the Soviet Government'.⁷²

Despite MacDonald's hope for success, the government would not be pushed into anything that could frighten the British electorate. The Tsarist debts and the question of British properties were the main points of the Commercial Treaty, but MacDonald had to be careful not to be seen to give the Soviets too much, which could be used for political gain by the Conservatives. The pre-war debts were a big stumbling block. The defaulting of repayment of original Tsarist loans comprised articles 7, 8 and 9 of the draft treaty – the most important articles in the paper.

However, it was accepted that a failure to succeed would be resented 'very bitterly by the Party, not only in the House of Commons but in the country. A chance of getting work for the unemployed would have again been missed'.⁷³ While the Government fell before the agreement could be ratified in parliament, this opinion shows that there was a largely pro-Soviet view amongst Labour members at the time, not necessarily

⁷⁰ MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/104

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ PRO CAB 23/48, p.326

because of ideology, but because a trade agreement would help bring employment back to the country.

Nevertheless, this pro-Soviet view should not be mistaken for a pro-Communist view, and this was highlighted by Labour's attitude to attempts by the CPGB to affiliate to the party. Given that Lenin had once referred to the ILP as 'an opportunistic party that has always been dependent on the bourgeoisie',⁷⁴ and that the Comintern had earlier dismissed the ILP's hopes of peaceful methods being employed by the new Third International with such fierce criticism of MacDonald and Snowden that they could neither forgive nor forget, it was unlikely that the leadership of the party would support the application.

But the views of Labour members, which were not always in line with their leadership, suggest support for the official position. Arguments ranged from the Communists being 'anti-labour and disruptive' to their newspaper devoting 'very much space to an attack on individual members of the Labour Movement'⁷⁵ to the fact that affiliation would give the Tories and Liberals the weapon of '[q]uotations from speeches of leading Communists!'⁷⁶ Other arguments against allowing the CPGB into the Labour Party were that Communists were slaves of Moscow, that they believed in force and violence, and that communism was not in the British democratic tradition. Frank Hodges, a Miners' delegate at the 1923 Labour Conference stated that 'Russia has nothing to teach the political democracy of the Western world. British institutions have grown up in accordance, very largely, with Britain's own peculiar history...'⁷⁷

Communists were also far from united on this issue. Some favoured affiliation, as influencing the working class would be easier inside the Labour Party. 'You cannot be

⁷⁴ V. I. Lenin, *British Labour and British Imperialism*, London, 1969, p.238

⁷⁵ Cited in N. Branson & B. Moore, *Our History. Labour-Communist Relations 1920-1951. Part I: 1920-1935*, Pamphlet 82, July 1990, p.10

⁷⁶ Cited in *ibid*

⁷⁷ Cited in *ibid*, p.13

a vanguard unless you are going to march with the working-class'⁷⁸ said the Communist J. F. Hodgson. Yet William Paul claimed that every argument Hodgson put forward in favour of affiliating to Labour 'can be applied to joining the Salvation Army...we have got to build up our own organisation, and we have to set out our own code of tactics.'⁷⁹ However, the debates inside the CPGB proved to be academic, as the Labour Party continued to reject any approach from the Communist Party. In 1921, 4,115,000 voted against affiliation with 224,000 in favour. In 1922 the rejecters numbered more than three million, in 1923 just less than three million and in 1924 there were again over three million. The most support the pro-affiliationists could muster was 366,000.⁸⁰ The Communists spent the rest of the decade trying to build alternative 'united fronts' which included the Miners' Minority Movement and the National Left Wing Movement, both of which had limited successes.

The official party line towards communism and Communists was definitely established by the early 1920s. It was one of critical acceptance of what was happening in Russia, while rejecting out of hand what the Communists wanted in Britain. This remained the party's position throughout the 1930s as well, despite the intense efforts of some left-wingers in the party who favoured co-operation with the CPGB to combat fascism, or from moderates who wanted to import Soviet economic ideas such as planning to counter the Depression.

This is not to say that the ideas and perceptions held by some in the party were completely closed, as ideas changed as different information became available. On the whole though, as the Labour leadership learned more about Soviet Communism, it tended to reinforce those ideas established in the early 1920s and therefore shape Labour's socialism in a negative way, to push Labour into a position stating "We are not Them".

⁷⁸ Cited in *ibid*, p.7

⁷⁹ Cited in *ibid*

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.8

Some of this information about the USSR came from visits by Labour members before and during the first Labour Government. These gave the party a valuable insight into the conditions that ordinary Russians had to cope with. Now Labour politicians were dealing directly with the Communist Government in a governmental capacity, on an equal footing. MacDonald therefore had an idea of the nature and the status of the Soviet Government. Just prior to the trade negotiations, on 28 January 1924, R. M. Hodgson, British Charge d’Affaires in Moscow, sent a letter to the previous Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon, stating that the Communist Party of Russia was ‘sick physically and morally. Lenin ‘is gone, never to return as a serious factor in politics; Trotski is an invalid.’⁸¹ He said that ‘[s]horn of its two leaders the party cuts a sorry figure.’⁸² He did not give much significance to any of the other possible leaders either.

Zinoviev, a poor creature at the best, finds his influence rapidly waning since the Communist debacle in Germany; Kamenev is a depressing personality incapable of giving inspiration to the mass; Stalin, “the man of steel”, a narrow-minded obstinate Georgian, entangled in the intricacies of Party doctrine; Bukharin, a fanatic, popular with the working man, but without the makings of a leader.’⁸³

MacDonald would surely have been hopeful that the extremist enthusiasm that brought the party to power was in decline. Enthusiasm for negotiating with the Soviet Government later came from the fact that the ‘moderates’ had been victorious over the ‘extremists’. Stalin and Bukharin – the exponents of Socialism in One Country had ousted Trotsky and Karl Radek (a gutter journalist⁸⁴) who pursued world revolution on the Soviet model.

However, the fact that negotiations did not bring about a successful conclusion consequently enabled Labour’s enemies to claim that the party had been too soft on

⁸¹ MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/104

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

the Soviets, and meant that MacDonald would be more cautious next time. Andrew Williams says that 1924 'was only a preliminary skirmish in what became and remained a very complex love-hate relationship between the British Labour movement and the Soviet Union.'⁸⁵ He concludes that Arthur Ponsonby best outlined the party organs' and the leadership's attitudes in the House of Commons.

The middle way is a difficult one. I believe the policy which the Labour Party has always advocated, the policy of conciliation, ought to guide us for the sake of British trade and for the sake of the revival of Russia itself. I have a great belief in the future of Russia, and it is with this consideration in view, and for the sake of healing the wounds of Europe, that we are desirous of bringing Russia into the comity of nations.⁸⁶

Labour's first period in Government failed to last long enough for the party to implement any of its programme to full effect, but it was able to partially improve Anglo-Soviet relations. But one aspect of this relationship - the Zinoviev letter - demonstrated two things about Labour's approach to politics. The first was the publication of a letter in the *Daily Mail* supposedly from Grigory Zinoviev, the head of the Comintern calling for British workers to prepare for revolution and communist military units in the British army. This would have been dismissed with less fuss had closer ties with the Kremlin not been a major part of Labour's programme. The second aspect to this problem though, demonstrates Labour's all-embracing philosophy. The cross-party alliance that MacDonald and his comrades were trying to build relied on gaining the trust of the middle classes and the Conservative press. It is surprising though, that he was so willing to accept what was published in newspapers that had never been anything less than critical of his administration, especially when he had not even seen the original document.

⁸⁵ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.19

⁸⁶ Cited in *ibid*

The Labour leader denounced the 'Red letter' more zealously than the Conservatives, as he wanted to ensure that he was seen to be tough on Communism and to give his opponents no ammunition with which to paint the party a darker shade of red than it actually was. But by failing to denounce the letter as a forgery, MacDonald's actions gave it credibility. This was despite the fact that there was a lack of evidence to support the *Daily Mail*'s accusations that the letter came from the Comintern. He chose to believe the *Daily Mail* rather than the Soviet Charge d'Affaires Khristian Rakovsky (although some may say that this is the equivalent of being caught between a rock and a hard place). Rakovsky said that he had not seen the letter, and declared it a forgery, saying that the most surprising thing was 'that the Foreign Office should have chosen to publish this document before ascertaining our views upon it.'⁸⁷ Two days after the General Election that swept the Conservatives back to power the committee appointed to examine the letter wrote a communiqué explaining that it found it

impossible on the evidence before them to come to a conclusion on the subject. The original letter has not been provided to or seen by the Government Department, and action was taken solely on what purported to be a copy. Unfortunately, in the short time available, the committee found it impossible to obtain evidence throwing further light on the matter.⁸⁸

Even now, with access to previously closed archives, the Foreign Office is still uncertain who wrote the Zinoviev letter.⁸⁹ The letter failed, however, to affect the outcome of the 1924 election, as Labour's vote actually increased by 1,100,000 votes (although the number of Labour MPs decreased by 40). The electorate also failed to allow this to become a long-term problem for Labour, as the party was returned to power in 1929. Yet this episode shows how far the party's opponents would go to try

⁸⁷ *Daily Herald*, 25 October 1924

⁸⁸ PRO CAB 23/48, p.542

⁸⁹ See G. Bennett, 'A most extraordinary and mysterious business': *The Zinoviev Letter of 1924*, London, 1999

to portray the Labour Party as nothing more than a Moscow lackey. Andrew Thorpe notes that 'Labour was attacked for being a Communist party in disguise, and Labourites had to try to deal with the accusation that they were conscious agents of the extreme left.'⁹⁰

Although Labour's first attempt at ruling the country could not be described as an overwhelming success, its attempts at reconciling Britain and the USSR were more profitable, especially in terms of the long-term aims of the Labour Party. It laid the foundations for the policies it would pursue the next time it was in power. The party's overall ideals of ensuring economic recovery in Britain and peace in Europe – two of its main objectives in the 1930s – depended on an accommodating Soviet Union, due to the potential of the untapped market, the size of the country and the general belief that socialism equalled peace. Everything the Labour leadership did concerning the USSR while it was in power kept these objectives firmly in mind.

2.4 Labour out of Office

In the years between the two Labour Governments, Anglo-Soviet relations worsened as the Tories sought to burn the bridges built by the 1924 Government. The raid on Arcos Ltd, a joint stock company and premises of the Trade Delegation of the USSR⁹¹, led to the cancellation of the 1921 trade agreement and the suspension of diplomatic relations between the British and Soviet Governments. Yet Labour still advocated close links with the USSR. *Labour and the Nation* showed that the USSR would remain highly prominent in Labour's thoughts even though it was not in power. It stated that both Britain and Russia had 'everything to gain by trading with each

⁹⁰ Thorpe, *History*, p.60

⁹¹ For details of the raid see W. P. & Z. Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations*, London, 1943 pp.267-290 and L. Fischer, *The Soviets in World Affairs*, New York 1960, pp.504-507. For the Soviet response, see *Dok. vne. pol.* Vol. X, Moscow, 1965, pp-245-288

other',⁹² and it criticised the Conservatives for the way they handled Anglo-Soviet affairs.

The Conservative Government, in its eagerness to snatch a fleeting political advantage by exploiting the bogey of revolution, tore up the Trade Agreement made with the Russians in 1924, with the result that orders for machinery and manufactures, which would have found employment for thousands of British workers, have been lost to this country. Gestures of this kind may be magnificent, but they are neither common sense nor good business.⁹³

The first line of this quote shows that Labour recognised the threat from its enemies. Yet even though the party leadership knew that the Conservatives would always try to gain such an advantage, it was still willing to renew Anglo-Soviet relations.

A Labour Government, whilst opposed to the interference of the Russian Government with the domestic policies of other nations, would at once take steps to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with it, would settle by treaty or otherwise any outstanding differences, and would make every effort to encourage a revival of trade with Soviet Russia.⁹⁴

The party remained careful however, to ensure that the electorate could not mistake Labour's socialism for an extension of the Kremlin's. The party's 1929 General Election manifesto warned voters that 'misrepresentation of Socialism and the aims and Policy of the Labour Party [are] already pouring from our opponents.'⁹⁵ Countering this claim, it states that '[t]he Labour Party is neither Bolshevik nor Communist. It is opposed to force, violence and confiscation as means of establishing the New Social Order. It believes in ordered progress and in democratic methods.'⁹⁶

In terms of tactics, the party had not moved too far away from its social democratic beliefs, and in terms of ideas, it still spoke of peace as against force and violence, of

⁹² Labour Party, *Labour and the Nation*, p.49

⁹³ Ibid

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ I. Dale, *Labour Party General Election Manifestos, 1900-1997*, London, 2000, p.33

⁹⁶ Ibid

compensation instead of confiscation. Its election statement also shows that it was careful not to offer ammunition to the Tories with which they could paint Labour a Soviet shade of red.

As Labour formed its second government at the end of the 1920s, three factors gave the party confidence in its Soviet policy. The first was the success of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the USSR. NEP was a less restrictive economic system than many commentators thought possible in a “Communist” state. By establishing a more market-based economy, the USSR became a country in which foreign businessmen saw new markets. NEP also gave the perception that the Soviet Union was moving away from its extremist politics. By 1929 advocates of socialism in one country were in power and internationalist revolutionaries were being pushed out of the CPSU. These three aspects of Soviet politics produced a stable environment that could promote a positive image with which to pursue foreign capital. This proved to be something of a success and in 1929 a delegation of British industrialists – not generally known as natural allies of the labour movement in this period – visited Moscow in March 1929.

The *Daily Herald* gave extensive coverage to the delegation believing that ‘important negotiations were to be entered into’.⁹⁷ Ernest Remnant of the Trade Delegation said that they were ‘naturally hopeful of success.’⁹⁸ The Russians welcomed the arrival of representatives of British industry to Moscow,⁹⁹ but the acting Chairman of the Soviet State Bank, and member of the People’s Commissariat for Finance, Georgy Pyatakov, commented that the future of trade between Russia and Britain was impossible without the restoration of normal diplomatic relations. Pyatakov said that relations should improve because of the delegation’s visit, and that an agreement between the

⁹⁷ *Daily Herald*, 3 April, 1929

⁹⁸ *ibid*

⁹⁹ See *Pravda*, March and April 1929, among other articles – ‘*Priezd delegatsii angliyskikh promishlennikov v moskvu; Anglo-sovetskie otnosheniya; Zayavlenie makdonal'da ob anglo-sovetskikh otnosheniyakh; Angliyskie otkliki na zayavlenie tov. Pyatikova*’

two countries could be reached leading to Russian trade with Britain being worth £150 million, possibly rising to £200 million. The Russians stressed the fact that no representatives of British banks were present, and an editorial in *Pravda* stated concern at the withdrawal from the delegation of significant figures such as Sir Robert Horne, a Director of Lloyds Banking Company. *Pravda* also hoped that the delegation would conclude that the resumption of diplomatic relations was essential.¹⁰⁰

Ramsay MacDonald said '[e]veryone knows that British engineering and other manufacturing concerns are not merely desirous of obtaining Russian orders, but are positively anxious to get them. It is all a question of conditions.'¹⁰¹ He said that it was Labour's contention 'that the fullest and most complete diplomatic intercourse should be resumed at once'¹⁰² as this was the only way to have any complaints satisfactorily met. Labour could portray their policy of a *rapprochement* with the Soviet Government as one of practical business rather than dark-red socialism, and the journey made by British capitalists to the country that advocated the exact opposite of what they believed in helped to vindicate Labour's policy.

2.5 Labour's second government and the USSR

When Labour returned to power in 1929 it immediately set about reconciling the two countries, and its policy towards the Soviet Union was clear – to maintain its original position that the USSR should be included in world affairs because it would be good for British business, and it would be good for European stability. The Labour Party was dealing with the Soviet Union as a matter of necessity – to pursue employment and peace – not because their socialisms were the same.

¹⁰⁰ *Pravda*, 10 April 1929

¹⁰¹ *Daily Herald*, 9 April, 1929

¹⁰² *Ibid*

This section focuses on how developments in the USSR confronted some of the traditions that defined Labour's socialism when the party was in power for the second time. It shows how pragmatists reconciled their need to broker agreements with the Kremlin with their own socialist beliefs. It looks at practical and ideological arguments in official Government business such as blocking Trotsky's entry into the country and at Henderson's negotiations with the Soviet Government. Attention is then turned to allegations that slave labour was used in the USSR, which confronted the labourist strand in the party's thought, and to the challenges to freedom of speech in the CPSU and to the 'alleged' persecution of the Orthodox Church which threatened Labour's egalitarian and religious heritage.

Labour was clear in its own mind that as 'Anglo-Soviet trade increased in the 1920s, so did the pressure for pragmatism in relations with the USSR. Anti-Bolshevism was one thing; the purse quite another.'¹⁰³ Labour's left-wing also called for a quick renewal of relations with the USSR. The *New Leader* claimed that because diplomatic relations had never legally been broken, normal relations could be resumed by administrative action. 'We hope that the earliest possible step will be taken in this direction – first, because it is a simple act of justice and common sense; second because the development of Russian trade is urgently needed; and third because normal relations with Russia are so essential to peace.'¹⁰⁴

It has already been shown that by the time Labour returned to power, things had changed in the USSR. Its economic base had altered, though by 1929 it was beginning to industrialise and collectivise. And the non-threatening 'moderates' - those pre-occupied with building socialism in the Soviet Union - were firmly in control in the Kremlin. The CPSU was more stable than the 'physically sick' body that Labour dealt with in 1924.

¹⁰³ M. Jabara Carley, 'A Fearful Concatenation of Circumstances': the Anglo-Soviet Rapprochement, 1934-36', *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 5, 1996, p.31

¹⁰⁴ *New Leader*, 21 June, 1929

Labour too had changed. Arthur Henderson was brought into the Cabinet as Foreign Secretary – the only fundamental change to MacDonald's 1924 Administration. Henderson's knowledge of Russian affairs, and his desire for peace through the League of Nations, shaped Labour's foreign policy until the Government fell in 1931. He maintained that 'Russia, with its vast population, cannot be permanently ignored; only by diplomatic and other intercourse with her will it be possible to bring her once more into the family of nations.'¹⁰⁵

Henderson's Foreign Office team included Hugh Dalton, acting as Parliamentary Under-Secretary, and Philip Noel Baker as the Parliamentary Private Secretary. Lord Robert Cecil was brought in as advisor on questions about the League of Nations. Labour's foreign policy towards the USSR and the League reflected its 'inclusive' socialism - a doctrine based on nation over class. The importance that Labour placed upon reconciliation with the Soviet Union became clear as the party rejected Leon Trotsky's application for political asylum in Britain in 1929, as accepting him could have been seen by the Soviet Union as something of a hostile act. Labour was also wary of offering residence to a figurehead of the internationalist movement, especially one who had been one of the most hostile critics of British labour movement and its leaders only five years before. It is therefore understandable that a Labour Government would not feel comfortable about having the original agitator for international revolution in its own backyard.

After much debate, Labour's Home Secretary, John Clynes, refused Trotsky's request because 'the right to asylum did not mean the right of an exile to demand asylum, but only of the right of the state to refuse it.'¹⁰⁶ Henderson and Dalton both felt that by dismissing Trotsky's application, the Labour Government had questioned Britain's historic image as being a haven for the internationally oppressed. Kenneth Miller

¹⁰⁵ Cited in Leventhal, *Arthur Henderson*, pp 155-156

¹⁰⁶ R. Segal, *The Tragedy of Leon Trotsky*, p.322

noted that Henderson thought that ‘the Cabinet should consider Trotsky’s application for residence in England since there was, after all, “a right to asylum.”’¹⁰⁷

The left-Liberal conscience of some moderate Labourites was being tested. Henderson disagreed with the Home Office, and Labour left-wingers criticised the decision. Fenner Brockway and John Strachey disagreed that such a decision would lead to problems in the Anglo-Soviet negotiations. George Bernard Shaw, like Brockway and Strachey, saw the history of asylum under attack. All three distanced themselves from Trotsky’s ideas, but still felt that he should be allowed to find refuge in Britain. Ultimately though, Trotsky stood little chance of being granted political asylum. It was not possible to negotiate seriously with Stalin’s Foreign Ministry while simultaneously giving refuge to his greatest political rival. Successfully negotiating with the USSR, it was believed, would bring its own rewards for the good of Britain as a whole - rewards far greater than maintaining the image of Britain as a ‘haven of freedom’. The case of Leon Trotsky highlights the influence that the USSR had on Labour’s domestic and foreign policies, even without exerting specific pressure.

Henderson concentrated on securing recognition of the USSR and attempted to find a solution to the two questions that dominated the rest of Labour’s Administration – those of unemployment and peace. As it turned out, the way the party conducted overseas business was the most successful element of the second Labour Government. There was some success in developing closer links with the USA (the New Deal was an inspiration for some of Labour’s economic theorists searching for a policy on planning), and Collective Security through the League of Nations remained one of the main interests in foreign affairs.

¹⁰⁷ K. E. Miller, *Socialism and Foreign Policy. Theory and practice in Britain to 1931*, The Hague, 1931, p.200

Arthur Henderson was a successful Foreign Secretary for Labour, despite not having the total trust of his Prime Minister. He was an intelligent public servant who knew Russia better than most in the Cabinet. But despite this, Henderson knew 'that his Prime Minister lacked full confidence in him and that he could not expect unquestioning support if he ran into difficulties.'¹⁰⁸ Yet he 'confounded his critics...[and was]...generally acknowledged as one of the successes of the second Labour Government.'¹⁰⁹ Pivotal to this success was a new trade agreement with the Soviet Union and a move towards co-operation and a reduction in armaments in Europe through the League of Nations.

The negotiations with the Soviet representatives were continued despite Henderson's hands being tied by MacDonald's promise that no exchange of ambassadors would take place between the two countries without the consent of Parliament. At the Exchequer, Snowden ensured that this Labour Government could not be accused of scaring the City, and therefore ruled out credit loans to the USSR. Henderson's contribution to the efforts to realign Anglo-Soviet relations could have been halted there and then. However, he continued to oversee the talks that would improve diplomatic and economic business but let it be known that he was not happy with the constraints on his ability to deal with the Russians, at the 1929 Party Conference. 'At the general election we made it unmistakably plain that if we formed a government one of the first things we would do would be to bring about a resumption of diplomatic relations with Russia.'¹¹⁰

The renewed negotiations had three aims. The first one was essentially short term, as it sought to conclude a trade deal that would help Britain out of the Depression. The second aim was to gain assurances that communist propaganda would be suspended. This was to prove difficult as the Soviet Government refused to accept responsibility

¹⁰⁸ Carlton, *MacDonald Versus Henderson*, p.16

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ Cited in C. Wrigley, *Arthur Henderson*, Cardiff, 1990, p.169

for the actions of the Third International, and this meant that no guarantee to end propaganda could be made. The third aim was more long term, as it was part of Henderson's continued hope of strengthening the League of Nations by creating conditions that would see the USSR become a member which would help the cause of peace in Europe.

Before negotiations even began however, Henderson found that his hands had been tied by his leader, who, without consulting the Foreign Office, promised that the Government would not permit the exchange of ambassadors without the approval of Parliament. Henderson disagreed, but knew that he could not go back on this statement without running the risk of being attacked in the press. Dalton felt that MacDonald was wrong to give this supplementary answer to the House, but realised that, for the same reasons that Henderson gave, the Foreign Secretary could not go back on it.

The King also frustrated Henderson's efforts. On 27 September 1929, he received a letter explaining that the King was not happy that when Henderson met with Valeryan Dvlgalevsky, the Soviet Ambassador in Paris, they referred to one another as 'Ambassador'. The King was not in favour of this, as friendly courtesies given to 'real' ambassadors should not be given to Ministers from the USSR who 'if they did not actually plan, certainly approved of the brutal murder of the King's first cousins, the late Emperor and Empress of Russia.'¹¹¹ It was understood by the King, after discussing the issue with Ramsay MacDonald, that Government policy was to 'insist on a satisfactory settlement of the points at issue between our two countries, such as propaganda and debts, before resuming relations.'¹¹²

¹¹¹ Henderson Papers, PRO FO 800/280

¹¹² Ibid

The Foreign Office replied on Henderson's behalf. It reminded the King that the majority returned to the House of Commons represented the importance in ending Soviet isolation. Labour and Liberal MPs were

committed by declarations made at the time of the elections to the resumption of relations with the Soviet Government and it soon became apparent that if this was to be achieved an essential condition would be the exchange of Ambassadors, as the Soviet Government representing as it does at the moment, a country with which we have for decades past maintained relations through the medium of representatives of the highest diplomatic rank, would be satisfied with nothing less.¹¹³

The Cabinet supported Henderson's approach. His colleagues agreed that the intricate nature of re-establishing relations meant that 'if a settlement of the question of debts is to be reached there is more likelihood of such a settlement once normal diplomatic relations are re-established rather than if relations remain suspended as at present.'¹¹⁴ Negotiations moved slowly. No trade agreement was signed and the issue of propaganda remained a stumbling bloc. In fact, the only concrete development that had come out of the negotiations was the announcement by Henderson that he would accept a Soviet ambassador in London.

The negotiations continued, and on 3 June, the Foreign Office received a note from the Department of Overseas Trade on the 'Financial and economic deterioration in the Soviet Union'. It reports a conversation between the British vice-consul in Lodz and a member of Eitigon and Company, a Lodz firm who traded with the USSR. The note points out that 'Mr Eitigon considers the financial situation is becoming precarious and that the position is worsening steadily.'¹¹⁵ The hand-written response underneath states that '[t]his is extremely interesting, as coming from a firm infinitely better fitted than any British firm to estimate the situation accurately, and which after second years' trading with the Soviet Government now resolves to grant no further

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ PRO FO 371/14029

credits.’¹¹⁶ Underneath this reply was a note agreeing that this was indeed interesting, and that at a time when reliable information was needed to help decide whether credits should be offered to the USSR, it shows fairly conclusively that ‘such trading is not possible on any scale appreciably larger than at present.’¹¹⁷

There was also a warning against believing Pyatakov’s figures given to the 1929 trade delegation. Pyatakov’s daring ‘will not bear close analysis.’¹¹⁸ The Anglo-Russian Committee stated that it was ‘quite inconceivable that the whole of [the] increased foreign trade will be awarded to Great Britain, since some of the main requirements of Soviet industry are raw materials which neither Great Britain nor the Dominions could possibly furnish.’¹¹⁹ It also ruled out any hope that British banks, at a time when British industry was suffering from ‘the prevailing tightness of money’¹²⁰ would be in a position to give such huge credits to a country which has steadfastly refused to honour its old debts.’¹²¹ However, those in the Foreign Office who supported closer ties with the USSR, such as Dalton, must have been encouraged by the fact that the Soviet Union had for some years been employing ‘American experts to help reconstruct the Soviet economy’ and that ‘the reports of these experts are said to have whetted the appetite of American finance and industry.’¹²²

Concerning the propaganda issue, Litvinov gave Ernest Remnant ‘a vague assurance that the Third International was an organisation entirely separate from the Russian Government.’¹²³ On the strength of this assurance, the Anglo-Russia Committee was convinced that ‘an effective guarantee for the cessation of hostile propaganda can be obtained.’¹²⁴ However, earlier in the year Remnant, Simon Harcourt-Smith and

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ PRO FO 371/14030

¹¹⁹ Ibid

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² PRO FO 371/14032

¹²³ PRO FO 371/14030

¹²⁴ Ibid

Lawrence Collier discussed this point with Dovgalevsky who did not deny 'the connection between the Soviet government and the Komintern.'¹²⁵

Nevertheless, by October, Remnant and Walton (who was responsible for the trade delegation) resigned from the Committee. It was claimed that both knew that the Russians had fooled them when they were in Moscow and were anxious that they should not fool anyone else in the same way.¹²⁶ This is strange given that prior to this, Walton had written to Henderson claiming that Stalin was not a dictator in the Mussolini sense. He was a dictator of Russia but not the CPSU, and he wanted more a moderate policy at home and a more conciliatory policy abroad.¹²⁷

Dovgalevsky returned to England and both he and Henderson continued to try to find solutions. In the final discussion Henderson 'informed the Soviet representative that the Government inferred that any guarantees regarding propaganda would extend to the Third International.'¹²⁸ Leventhal states that '[b]y papering over their difficulties the Foreign Office could appear to snatch a modest victory without the Soviet authorities agreeing to specific references in the formal protocol that admitted their responsibility for the actions of the Comintern.'¹²⁹ In a House of Commons debate on 5 November 1929, Henderson defended what he had done and, supported by the Liberals, won the vote by a substantial majority (324 to 199). Ambassadors could now be exchanged. The Soviet Union sent Grigory Sokolnikov as its envoy, and the King was obliged to receive him.

Henderson chose an experienced diplomat rather than a Labour politician to be Ambassador. Sir Esmond Ovey was Henderson's choice. While Leventhal states that Ovey 'at least spoke Russian, but was otherwise in the traditional ambassadorial mold

¹²⁵ Ibid

¹²⁶ PRO FO 371/14032

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Leventhal, *Arthur Henderson*, p.157

¹²⁹ Ibid pp. 157-158 For Government discussion on the recognition see FO 371/14846 (1)

(sic)',¹³⁰ Williams comments that he played an important role in shaping Labour's attitudes to the Soviet Union for the rest of its Administration. According to Williams, Ovey 'had a great impact on [Beatrice Webb's] drift during 1930-31 towards the Soviet Union', and that he

was in an almost unique position for feeding information to the Labour Government. There is no evidence that Henderson doubted the truth of his despatches. Dalton went to the Soviet Union as soon as he could for confirmation...Even Beatrice Webb was convinced!¹³¹

The choice of Ovey as Ambassador should not only be seen in the context of Labour's pragmatic approach to international affairs, but also as a choice that reflects the relatively conservative nature of the Foreign Office. David Carlton observes that the background and training of Foreign Office officials 'stressed prudence, continuity and especially the defence of the national interest in foreign policy.'¹³²

While the majority of Labourites supported Henderson's work, Labour's opponents criticised the decision, claiming that the Government had given too many concessions to the Soviets. H. N. Brailsford attacked these opponents in the *New Leader* in February 1930. He said that Tory tactics of baiting the Russian bear by challenging the Labour Government over its business with the USSR – here about Soviet propaganda – was not just 'the usual effort of an Opposition to embarrass the Government of the day',¹³³ and that the Tories had 'something much more important in mind.'¹³⁴

They are bent on a final breach with Russia. Now there is just one way of attaining that end – to manoeuvre a Labour Government into doing it. Any rupture for which a Tory Ministry alone were responsible would be temporary. But if any subtlety could tempt Labour into a quarrel that ended in the expulsion of the Russian

¹³⁰ Ibid, p.158

¹³¹ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p. 128

¹³² Carlton, *MacDonald versus Henderson*, p.20

¹³³ *New Leader* 7 February 1930

¹³⁴ Ibid

Ambassador from London, a generation might pass before another took his place.¹³⁵

He continued to outline the long-term plan of this attack.

Russians would use their arts to foster discontent; Mr Churchill would renew his surreptitious conversations with the white Generals; the oil magnates would again allow their imaginations to stray toward the pipe-line that crosses Georgia, while the "*Daily Mail*" would discover that religion is in danger. An occasion for an intervention would soon present itself, and even if a Labour Government had pronounced the Russians impossible, the resistance to warlike adventure might be weak.¹³⁶

Brailsford questioned why, even though Henderson had already exchanged ambassadors, the right-wing did not realise 'that an expansion of trade in Russia is one of the hopeful issues from our tribulations of unemployment.'¹³⁷

On 16 April 1930 Henderson's hard work paid off, and he successfully concluded a trade agreement with the Soviet Union. There can be little doubt that much hope rested upon the trade issue. The Five Year Plan that the Soviet Union had embarked upon was a source of inspiration for many in the Labour Party. The wider implications this had on Labour's economic thought are discussed elsewhere, but prominent party economists such as Hugh Dalton argued in favour of a planned economy in Britain. It is enough to note here that in the first year of resumed trade, Russia took between £6 – 7 million worth of goods, mainly engineering, chemical and electrical goods, while Britain took £34 million of Russian goods. It must be assumed that as this was a long-term policy of Labour's, these numbers would have risen over the course of this Parliament had Labour stayed in power.

Henderson was kept well informed by Ovey about the rhetoric of Soviet foreign policy and what the reality was. He reported to Henderson that

¹³⁵ Ibid

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ Ibid

I remain convinced... that the whole policy of the Soviets will consist in going as far as possible in vituperation of all foreign countries and Governments, without actually causing a breach of relations. In this the Communist Party, who are directors of the policy are at least logical and consistent.¹³⁸

He questioned whether the tolerance of the European powers will 'prove equal to the docility of the Russian people.'¹³⁹

Ovey and William Strang, who was based in Leningrad, continued to report to Henderson on the possibilities that the Five Year Plan offered. These reports were mostly positive, and it can therefore be assumed that these were sources of hope for the Foreign Secretary. There can be no doubt that Henderson wanted his negotiations with the USSR to succeed for many reasons. But even as late as December 1930, Henderson commented that he was unhappy at the progress made, and that he was mindful of the fact that the USSR was still a stick with which the Tories could beat Labour. He complained to Ovey that

I am bitterly disappointed at the results of one year's experience of renewed relations with the Soviet government whose actions seem designed deliberately to play into the hands of the opponents of continued Anglo-Russian relations.¹⁴⁰

The critical, yet supportive, reports from Ovey coincided with stories emerging from the USSR that touched on two issues important to the Labour Party. The first was the accusation that forced labour was being used in the USSR, the second was the allegation that the Soviet Government was persecuting members of the CPSU and the Russian Orthodox Church. Both issues were of particular interest to the Labour Party as they challenged many of the fundamental ideas and beliefs of various groups in the party. Trade unionists feared for workers' rights in the USSR, socialists were

¹³⁸ PRO FO 371/14846 (1)

¹³⁹ Ibid

¹⁴⁰ Cited in Wrigley, *Arthur Henderson*, p.170

concerned for the safety of democracy in the CPSU and Christians feared for the freedom of religion in the Marxist State.

Michael Farbman wrote about the first issue in the *New Statesman and Nation*, claiming that Labour's opponents were using this argument to exploit it as a new anti-Bolshevik scare, as British political life needs some kind of anti-Bolshevik scare to continue and 'only its particular form needs to be changed.'¹⁴¹ The stories about forced labour continued for some time. Correspondence between Farbman and a Swedish critic filled the letters pages of the *NS&N* for many weeks. Yet the response from an American journalist in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times* ¹⁴² was more likely to persuade Henderson that there was no forced labour in the USSR. While it is obvious that forced labour was used extensively in Stalin's Russia, this is not the point. What was important here is that the *perception* of workers' rights in the USSR was good. The fact that there appeared to be so many American supporters of trade with the USSR, if not support for the actual *raison d'être* of the Soviet Union, meant that Henderson was on quite solid ground in continuing to pursue economic agreements with the Russians.

The second issue was more complex. In the 1920s, party members who sympathised with the USSR were willing to regard the attacks on the Soviet State in the 1920s as nothing more than attacks on international socialism by the Tories, and supported the Bolsheviks' right to defend the revolution against 'counter-revolutionaries', 'class enemies' and 'White Russians'. Now Stalin turned his attention to his CPSU comrades and the Orthodox Church. While the first group could be regarded as simply a change in personnel in the ruling party, the second group was particularly pertinent for Labour Party members because of the historic links the British labour movement had with the Methodist Church. 'Many Labour Party members felt the need to define

¹⁴¹ *New Statesman and Nation*, 21 March, 1931

¹⁴² 'Soviet visitor sees no drafted labour' in *The New York Times*, 27 March 1931 and 'Exiled Kulaks can find work only in Forests' in *Chicago Tribune* (Paris edition) 30 March, 1931

their faith in quasi-religious terms. The ghost of 'christian socialism' still haunted the party and at times it remained a part of its distinctive style.'¹⁴³ Religion also played a part during the Spanish Civil War as Catholic Labour members made their voices heard.

The Government knew about the persecution and the rise in the use of terror tactics in the USSR. In December 1929 Henderson received a transmission of a dispatch sent from Moscow to the Norwegian Foreign Minister that offered a detailed account of what he called the 'New Period of Terror.'¹⁴⁴ There were general details about how unrest and revolt had returned to the Russian provinces and towns due to the lack of food, and the hardships that Russians faced because of this and the fact that winter was approaching. The transmission then commented on '[r]umours regarding dissensions within the party [which] remain persistent...Cleansing of the party constantly takes place, and there are many who do not feel safe.'¹⁴⁵

The message to Henderson was clear, although there is little to suggest that he would have been particularly surprised, as he had always been uncomfortable with the use of violence to overthrow the old order in 1917 and remained wary about Communist tactics used to build socialism in the USSR. His doubts were reinforced in July 1930 when he received correspondence from Britain's Ambassador in Moscow, Sir Esmond Ovey, concerning the *chistka* (purge) of party workers in the CPSU. Commenting on a report from Grigory Ordzhonikidze, the Commissar for the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection, Ovey wrote that the purges had led to 51,000 state employees being removed from their posts. While he claimed that the 'system has certain obvious merits' (he doesn't say what these merits were), he claimed that 'it may easily prove in practice to be a dangerous one and is likely to lead to serious injustices...The idealism of the members of the "chistkas" may easily become

¹⁴³ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.103

¹⁴⁴ PRO FO 418/71

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

subordinate to personal motives, and the temptation to turn a man out of his job in order to secure it for one of themselves, must be a severe one.’¹⁴⁶ Ovey clearly understood the nature of the Stalinist purges before they had even come close to their more famous consequences.

The final issue was the harassment of the Russian Orthodox Church, and there was a stubborn refusal to accept these stories. This continued the practice of either defending or refusing to accept the harsh realities of building a new society that began after the revolution and, as shall be shown later, persisted in the 1930s. The new Soviet Ambassador in London told Sidney Webb and Philip Noel-Baker that ‘he had left Russia in the middle of December unaware that there was any such thing as Religious Persecution...he arrived in England to find the question becoming to be one of burning political importance’.¹⁴⁷

Pro-USSR Labourites dismissed the stories as nothing more than a campaign by the Conservative Party and Christian right-wingers.¹⁴⁸ The *Daily Herald* reported that there was “No Persecution of Christians” in an article entitled ‘Firm Reply from the Russian Church’.¹⁴⁹ The story carried ‘facts’ from the Russian Holy Synod which declared that ‘[t]here is no religious persecution by the Soviet Union and there never was’ and it declared that the stories in the Conservative-supporting *Morning Post* were ‘absolutely untrue. The *Daily Herald* correspondent wrote that

[t]he Soviet Press prints a signed interview with the leading orthodox churchmen, denying religious persecution by the Soviet Union, and sharply taking the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury to task over recent anti-Bolshevik declarations.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ PRO FO 418/73

¹⁴⁷ Cited in Williams, *Labour and Russia*, pp.104-105

¹⁴⁸ For a pro-Soviet account of the “alleged” religious persecution, see W. P. & Z. Coates, *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations*, London, 1943, chapter XIV. For a more balanced account, see Williams, *Labour and Russia*, pp. 102-110

¹⁴⁹ *Daily Herald*, 17 February 1930

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*

Ramsay MacDonald wrote in the *Daily Herald* that the Government did not have the facts.

News supplied from Riga should not be believed until corroborated; a good part of the statements which have done duty from time to time have been proved to be false. The History of religion in Russia, however, is unfortunately full of the records of persecution.¹⁵¹

The party adopted a 'wait and see' policy towards these stories, as it was concerned with the completion of the trade agreement, as this was an integral part of Labour's economic policy. The leadership wanted to learn the full facts before it tackled the difficult question of challenging a nation's right to conduct its own affairs, despite the fact that these questions challenged many of Labour's long-held beliefs. It clearly caused problems though, as Williams notes that there was

a dialectic between those in the Labour Party who believed the allegations might be true and those who only concerned themselves with the domestic impact of the campaign. Snowden and MacDonald broadly speaking found themselves in the second category. Henderson was in the first category and he probably went through agonies of conscience until he persuaded himself of the lack of truth in the allegations. A lot of people fell into both categories.¹⁵²

Henderson's approach was probably most indicative of many party members' approach to Soviet affairs as a whole – to believe what they chose and try to ignore everything else. A small number of people of course chose to believe in everything the Soviet propaganda machine fed them and ignore anyone opposing them. In the face of rising unemployment and fascist aggression in the 1930s, this situation remained, in the main, the same.

¹⁵¹ *Daily Herald*, 25 February 1930

¹⁵² Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.108

2.6 Conclusion

The 1931 banking crisis that led to the end of the second Labour Government had a number of consequences, some of which directly influenced leftist members of the Labour Party to openly encourage a closer relationship with the USSR in the 1930s. Not only did it raise questions about the direction of the party's economic ideals, which were discussed earlier, it caused irreversible splits. Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden and J. H. Thomas left the Cabinet in order to join with Conservative and Liberal MPs in a National Government.

But more importantly for those that remained active in the labour movement it encouraged the belief that capitalism was close to collapse and that the class struggle was sharpening. Members of the labour movement became even more suspicious of the capitalist ruling class. A. J. P. Taylor said that Labour again 'claimed to have been intrigued out of office by a ruthless and unscrupulous capitalist class.'¹⁵³ This led the ILP to believe that it would be better to fight for socialism outside of the Labour Party, and other socialists like Cripps to demand that on returning to power, Labour must pass an act to ensure this could not happen again (widely seen as a call for a some form of 'dictatorship', which made Cripps seem even more enamoured with the USSR).

Politically, the party was in disarray and a division between left and right seemed clearer as ideology became more important than it had been in the gradualist years of MacDonald. After Labour left Office and expelled MacDonald and his followers, the party moved leftwards as it sought to define itself once again. The USSR was never far away in this quest, and the ideas and policies that have been discussed here were prevalent in these debates. Information gathered from the visits to Lenin's and

¹⁵³ Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945*, p.371

Stalin's Russia throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as is discussed later, aided this search for identity.

The view that Labour Party members had of the Soviet Union as the party left office had been fundamentally shaped by not only its dealings with the USSR, but also its own understanding of what it was trying to do. After the first revolution in Russia, Labour's socialists hailed it as an event that would free the oppressed people of Russia and change the world. It also changed the Labour Party as it moved leftwards after the war. This was helped by the meeting in Leeds in June 1917 where many reformist socialists, for a brief moment in time, flirted with the romanticism of revolution.

A direct consequence of the second revolution in Russia was Labour's new constitution and the adoption of Clause IV- the clause for the workers, designed to either offer socialist hope to party members and trade unionists, or to ensure that Bolshevik tactics were not adopted in Britain. The subsequent Civil War in Russia allowed Labour to rediscover its internationalism that was lost during World War One, as it defended Soviet Russia from attacks by capitalists and anti-socialist forces. It also allowed Labour to develop its own ideas about the rights of nations to tread their own paths, which was one reason why the party was so in favour of a League of Nations.

Ironically, as Labour sought to extend the notion of national sovereignty to the Russians, Russia took the opposite position as the Comintern was born. The attitude of the Labour Party towards the Soviet Union was invariably influenced by the relationship it had with the Comintern and the Communist Party of Great Britain. Labour had to develop a twin-track policy concerning the USSR. It had to negotiate with the Soviet Government in the traditional manner, with ambassadors seeking trade agreements whilst simultaneously ensuring that the existence of a Communist Party in

Britain did not arm opponents of the Labour Party with ammunition with which to portray Labour as further left than it was or even as a “Moscow lackey” – the accusation that some Labourites levelled at the CPGB. This helped define Labour’s actions when it was in a position to influence events. During the second government, Labour’s identity was shaped in part by its programme at that time, but also by events in the USSR which challenged some of the party’s traditions through aggressive policies towards workers, socialists in the CPSU and Orthodox Christians.

When the party was in Opposition in the 1930s concerns about the “Moscow lackey” label were even more important with the rise of extremist politics in Europe and the desire for unity to counter this in Britain. This Communist encroachment onto traditional Labour ground influenced the way Labour’s political thought developed, as it had to ensure that the Communists did not outflank it on the left if it moved towards the central political ground. However, at the same time it had to move away from the revolutionary slogans of the CPGB so as not to give its opponents ammunition with which to portray the Labour Party as a “Bolshevik” Labour Party.

What role did the information Labour gathered from its dealings with the Soviets when it was in power play? It certainly formed a fundamental part of the party’s understanding of what the Soviet Union was about and how it worked. It gained information from ambassadors and Foreign Office staff that reinforced fears and taught lessons. Henderson was alarmed, but not surprised, by news of the oppressive nature of the Stalinist system as he learnt about the purges of CPSU members. But news of the successes of the Five Year Plan offered Labour an alternative to the free trade orthodoxy of Snowden, which was so important to the economic thought of Labourites in the 1930s.

As Labour vacated the Government benches, it can be said that its opinions regarding the Soviet Union ranged from hope for the pragmatists and the idealists, to distrust

from the politicians who believed in the parliamentary system, as they knew how Communists worked and the tactics they would employ to gain support from traditional Labour ground. The idealists and the pragmatists both had their views confirmed when they visited the USSR.

CHAPTER THREE

Searching for Truth: Labour's visits to Communist Russia

One of the most difficult tasks...is to strike a proper balance between the various accounts of present-day conditions in the Soviet Union, which range from the ultra-pessimistic to the ultra-optimistic. The unsympathetically-disposed observer perceives nothing but privation and inefficiency wherever he goes, while the "Red" sympathisers sees in the broad plains of Russia the limitless asphodel meadows of an earthly paradise. Neither of the above estimates can be accurate, and the objectively-minded are faced with the problem of having to reconcile contradictory accounts.¹

Numerous visitors made the long trip to communist Russia in the 1920s and 1930s. Some were independent travellers, but many went representing the British Labour Party. Official delegations from the labour movement were sent to explore the new society being built by the Bolsheviks. The reports sent back by all visitors served as a balance to the hostile newspapers such as the *Daily Mail and Morning Post*, which were using words like 'Gang of Thieves and assassins' and 'The Red Devils of Moscow' to describe the leaders in the Kremlin. By contrast it was difficult to find such language, unless it was being repeated from the *Mail*, in any of the pro-Labour media. Scare stories constantly appeared in the Conservative press, and in many cases the stories that returned with the British socialists were used to destroy the myths created by Communism's enemies. These included the claim that the Bolsheviks had nationalised women and children and that leading communists were living in Tsarist palaces eating expensive food while the workers were starving or that people were dying.

Members of the Labour Party and Trade Union Congress delegation, visiting Russia in May 1920, refuted these allegations. They noted in their reports that most of the accounts that they had seen about Russia in the capitalist press before they made their trip 'proved to be perversions of the facts. The whole impression gained was of a

¹ PRO FO 418/73, Esmond Ovey to Arthur Henderson, 1 June 1931

different character from that presented by these accounts.’ They said ‘[w]e did not find that either women or children had been nationalised...We did not see people fall dead of starvation in the streets’ and they saw ‘...no evidence of extraordinary luxury on the part of the leading Commissars.’²

The *New Leader* and the *New Statesman* also ran articles suggesting that stories in the capitalist media were not true. In June 1920, the *Labour Leader* reported a claim in the *Times* that the Bolsheviks were stage – managing a Communist paradise to show the British delegates. ‘The British Labour delegates are now reported to have reached Samara. If the Soviet Government can stage-manage a Communistic paradise from Petrograd to Samara, surely it deserves all success!’³ Reviewing Arthur Ransome’s *Six Weeks in Russia*, the *New Statesman* claimed that the book made clear that ‘the official picture of Russia and of the Bolshevik Government which is periodically drawn in blood and thunder for the benefit of the British elector is a monstrous perversion.’⁴

This did not mean that all Labour’s visitors sent back glowing reports praising the Communists for saving the world and this highlights the fact that no definitive viewpoint about the nature of the Soviet Union emerged. The reports, books and articles written by returnees were often greeted with enthusiasm by party members who were eager to learn about the type of socialism that was being constructed in the land of Tsarism. One delegate, Ethel Snowden, wife of Philip, wrote about her journey in *Through Bolshevik Russia*, and this was popular enough amongst Labourites to justify a second printing after publication.

The reports depended on the individual’s interpretation of socialism and meant that different assessments could be made of the same thing. Paul Winterton, a student who visited the Soviet Union in 1928, said that ‘[t]wo men may go to Russia at the same

² Trade Union Congress, *British Labour Delegation to Russia 1920 - Report*, London, 1920, p.6

³ *Labour Leader*, 3 June 1920

⁴ *New Statesman and Nation*, 12 July 1919

time and see exactly the same things, and yet produce widely divergent reports.’⁵ In many cases, people saw what they *wanted* to see, and their own political background dictated this. Of course, they also saw what the authorities and those who produced the itineraries wanted them to see as well.

There were obviously many “truths” that emerged from the reports from returnees. However, this means that opinions are also open to criticism from observers who have the benefit of hindsight. But visitors to the USSR should not be judged too harshly for writing what may seem to the modern historian as blatant lies or blind conviction as their reports were products of their time. Historians who are scornful of anyone who returned with a positive view of Lenin’s Russia and the USSR fail to fully understand the mood at home, and the great influence such visits had on thinking when they returned. It was one thing for a country to issue propaganda stating how good life was there, another for people to return and substantiate such claims. This does not mean that historians writing during the Cold War period, such as David Caute and Sylvia Margulies, should be ignored. But their works should be read within the context of their time – just as the works of the visitors should be.⁶

This does not, of course, excuse some of the more outrageous claims made by some travellers. The Webbs accepted that Stalin was not a dictator. Unlike the other dictators such as Mussolini and Hitler,

Stalin is not invested by law with any authority over his fellow-citizens, and not even over the members of the Party to which he belongs...Stalin is in no sense the highest official in the USSR, or even in the Communist Party.⁷

⁵ P. Winterton, *A Student in Russia*, Manchester, 1931, preface

⁶ See D. Caute, *The Fellow Travellers* New York, 1973 and S. Margulies, *The Pilgrimage To Russia: The Soviet Union and the Treatment of Foreigners*, Madison, USA, 1968

⁷ S & B. Webb, *Communism: A New Civilisation*, London, 1937, p.431

This was as ridiculous then as it is now. Indeed, A. J. P. Taylor described their book *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation* as ‘the most preposterous book ever written about Soviet Russia.’⁸ However, some of the things that returnees wrote about reflected what was actually happening in Russia in this period of the country’s history. George Lansbury painted a picture of a paradise being built, and while at times naïve, he was, to a large extent, writing honestly, when this is compared with what went before under the Tsars. But the more moderate observers, such as the 1920 Labour delegation, who countered their enthusiasm with criticism, should be accepted as credible witnesses whose accounts of Soviet life and politics give the historian valuable insights.

The socialist press in Britain also played an important role in helping Labour to understand what was happening in Soviet Russia. Through the stories and articles that appeared, the Labour rank and file and leadership were given a greater insight into Russian life than their opponents. This was necessary as leaders such as Ramsay MacDonald attached much importance to cordial relations with the Kremlin. The Communist experiment occupied more column space than any other foreign country except perhaps the United States of America. It was not until the rise of Nazism in Germany that the Soviet Union’s hold over the columns of the newspapers was challenged by a European power. Stories about Russia appeared more and more frequently in the pages of the Labour press. Newspapers and journals all had a part to play in shaping the movement’s understanding of Soviet Russia and there was clearly a great deal of interest.

Those who travelled to Russia did so with only a limited knowledge about where they were going. Since the revolution, the Bolsheviks had restricted the numbers and movements of foreign journalists. Those sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause could stay, although they were limited in what they could send home for publication. M.

⁸ A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, Harmondsworth, 1975, p.431n

Philips Price was one such observer. As special correspondent in Russia for the *Manchester Guardian* from 1914 to 1919, he reported from within Russia after the revolution, giving details of how life was changing under the new regime.

Price wrote on a wide range of topics whilst reporting on the attempt to build socialism in Russia, and he did not confine himself to recounting the effects of the revolution on Moscow or Petrograd. In December 1917, he began a series 'Through the Russian Provinces', that took him to the Volga region, including Samara, Kazan and Nizhni Novgorod. Articles included 'The Peasants and their Land Programmes' 'The Russian Tartars and the Revolution' and 'The Voice of the People on the Revolution'. Price's articles served to counter some of the stories in the Conservative press mentioned earlier. Price had his own agenda as well though. He was of the opinion that Russia should be treated fairly, and he soon decided that he would 'sink or swim with the Soviets.'⁹

This chapter is concerned with some of the key visits that were made to communist Russia by Labourites during the 1920s and 1930s and focuses on what the visitors found whilst there. The first visitors from the Labour Party made their trips in 1920. George Lansbury went in an unofficial capacity in that he did not officially represent the Labour Party. An official delegation made up of Labour Party and Independent Labour Party members and trade unionists toured the country after Lansbury had left. Ramsay MacDonald chose Menshevik Georgia instead of Bolshevik Russia, and returned thoroughly impressed with what he found. His time here was of great importance as it did more to shape his understanding of Soviet socialism than anything else until he formed the first Labour Government four years later.

⁹ Rose, T. (ed.) *Morgan Philips Price: Dispatches from the Revolution, Russia 1916-1918*, London, 1997, p.9 For more on the ideas of Philips Price, see *The Soviet, The Terror and Intervention*, New York, 1920, and *My Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution*, London, 1921

3.1 1920: Lansbury, MacDonald and the first official delegation

George Lansbury visited Soviet Russia twice in the 1920s, the first time in the early part of 1920 and the second in 1926. The details of his first journey were reported in his book *What I Saw in Russia*, published in June 1920. His devotion to the revolution shone through in this book, which is surprising given that he was a Christian pacifist. However, it can be explained by his comment that his ‘sympathies are always with the left-wingers and those who stand for principle.’¹⁰

Lansbury found Bolshevik Russia a harsh place to be, but at the same time, a place filled with hope and expectation. He noted that children suffered from hardships, hunger and disease, but claimed that even the most fierce critic of the Soviet regime

is obliged to confess that within the narrow limits of their means, and these are miserably small owing to our infamous blockade...the Bolsheviks, led by Lunacharsky the Minister for Education, have done everything possible to preserve the life of the children, both mentally and physically.¹¹

He continued to say that, despite the long queues for food, he saw no signs of depression ‘or lack of mental or physical vigour’.¹²

Lansbury met a number of people whilst in Russia, including the anarchists Prince Pyotr Kropotkin and his wife and the secretary of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Tikhon. But perhaps his most important meeting was with Lenin. Lansbury’s assessment of Lenin was generous to say the least. He praised his ‘far reaching ability, downright straightforwardness and the whole hearted enthusiasm and devotion to the cause of humanity...’¹³. Lansbury described Lenin as impersonal and the best hated and loved man in the world but believed that he was ‘absolutely

¹⁰ Cited in J. Schener, *George Lansbury*, Manchester, 1990, p.1

¹¹ G. Lansbury, *What I Saw in Russia*, London, 1920, p.92

¹² Ibid p.93

¹³ Ibid, p.22

indifferent both to love and hatred – I do not mean that he has no feeling, because I am confident that he loves little children.’¹⁴

However, in his pursuit of socialism, ‘Lenin could not be thwarted or turned one side or the other by personal consideration of any kind’.¹⁵ He also refused to believe that the stories of violence that were reported in the British press could be attributed to Lenin. ‘While talking with him it was impossible to imagine that such a man would love or care for violence or butchery, torture or any of the other horrors which are laid to his charge. He is too big in his outlook and much too wide in his sympathies to want to kill anyone.’¹⁶

Lansbury accepted that violence was used, but also that Lenin could not have known about it, and that every one received ‘some form of trial’¹⁷ during the Red Terror, despite the lack of evidence to support this assertion (this was told to him by head of the *Cheka*, Feliks Dzerzhinsky). Perhaps the only reason that Lansbury accepted the use of violence, in spite of his pacifism, was that he desperately wanted to see socialism being constructed. He should not be singled out for this, as he was not the only socialist willing to overlook elements of the Soviet system that did not fit the Labour Party’s socialism in the hope that they would see a state constructed along socialist lines. In the 1930s some Labourites who favoured an alliance with the USSR and CPGB members in order to fight fascism adopted this approach.

The second visit from the Labour Party was an official delegation, whose members ‘reflected a wide range of opinion about Soviet socialism’ and were given ‘unrivalled access to the Bolshevik leaders, to institutions, and to documentation of all kinds.’¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid, p.26

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid, p.115

¹⁸ S. White, ‘British Labour in Soviet Russia, 1920’, *English Historical Review* Vol. 109, (1994) p 621. Both this article and Graubard’s *British Labour and the Russian Revolution* offer some excellent details and analysis of this delegation

The main reason why this party could offer such a broad analysis of the Russian situation is the numerous interests that were represented within this group. The Labour Party sent three delegates, Ethel Snowden, Tom Shaw and Robert Williams. The TUC members in Russia were Alfred Purcell, Margaret Bondfield, and Herbert Skinner. Charles Roden Buxton and L. Haden Guest were joint secretaries and Ben Turner was chairman. The Independent Labour Party sent two delegates in an unofficial capacity, Clifford Allen and Richard Wallhead.

The group travelled for six weeks in Russia between May and June 1920 officially representing the British labour movement. As the first delegation of its kind, it greatly influenced the way the party felt about Soviet Russia. The very fact that Labourites had been to Russia gave them a credibility to speak about it that others did not have. The *Labour Leader* argued that because Tom Shaw had been to Russia and to Poland, he ‘spoke with peculiar authority’.¹⁹ The paper accepted that because he was there, he should be more informed than other commentators. Because Tom Shaw said that Poland was the aggressor in the Russo-Poland conflict, Poland *was* the aggressor in the conflict.

The party reached Petrograd on 11 May, and was greeted by welcomes in *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* in both Russian and English, showing that this was obviously important to the Soviets as well (*Izvestiya* did the same for Italian delegates in June). The article in *Pravda*, entitled ‘*Nash privyet/Our Greetings*’, spoke of the split in the proletarian movement that had grown since 1914, about the Allied blockade and how the Russian workers had been cut off from the rest of the world. Russia’s enemies

have made every attempt to raise enmity between the Russian workers and the proletarians of other countries. They attempted to stifle the revolutionary Russian workers with the hands of the brother-workers of England, France, Italy and other countries.²⁰

¹⁹ *Labour Leader*, 17 June 1920

²⁰ *Pravda*, 18 May 1920

It claimed to understand that the delegates did ‘not share our views on all questions’, but placed emphasis on this visit as ‘one of the stages’ in the process of unifying the workers of the world.²¹

The *Izvestiya* article ‘*Dobro pozhalovat!*’/Be Welcome’ embodied a widespread sentiment amongst the Bolsheviks at this time, namely that the working class of Britain was ready to add its full support to the world revolution. This spectacular misreading of the international situation should be put down to revolutionary excitement, but there really was little evidence to back up such hopes. In amongst the general welcomes given to the delegates, the article attempts to inspire the Russian workers and Red Army soldiers by telling them that ‘[t]oday Moscow will accept within its walls dear guests – the representatives of many millions of British workers who are fighting against the British capitalists, landlords and generals.’²² The view of *Izvestiya* reflects that of Lenin. Snowden said that

[h]e showed a surprising lack of knowledge of the British Labour Movement. He gave to conscious and intelligent Communism a far greater place in British politics than can truly be accorded to it, seeing there is as yet no organised Communist party, but only a handful of extremists of the older Socialist movements.²³

Ethel Snowden’s socialism largely reflected that of her husband. She had a strict Christian background and appears to have favoured some of the harsher elements of Bolshevik rule that emphasised control. Like all the visitors who went to Russia, she explored aspects of Soviet socialism that were important to her. That is why her book *Through Bolshevik Russia* includes chapters entitled ‘Education and Religion’, ‘The Dictatorship of the Communists’ and ‘The Suppression of Liberty’. This was a

²¹ Ibid

²² *Izvestiya*, 18 May 1920

²³ E. Snowden, *Bolshevik Russia*, London, 1920 p.117

common feature of the works that came out of people's visits as Labour's history dictated the interests of the members over Russian affairs, so trade unionists studied workers' and trade union rights, feminists studied women's issues in the Soviet Union, economists studied socialist planning. These reflected life in Soviet Russia in a way that could be easily understood by readers back home, and details about Soviet practice informed Labour's policy towards the Kremlin more than second hand reports from newspapers.

The sober socialism of Snowden led her to celebrate the temperance of the Bolshevik regime. She appeared untroubled at the thought of the death penalty being implemented if people are caught drinking, '...the attitude of the Government to the question of drinking is evidenced in the fact that if a railway worker is discovered drunk, having possessed himself illegally of vodka, he is promptly shot.'²⁴ She believed that the absence of drinking shops and public drinking and therefore the lack of men and women 'the worse for liquor' was a 'commendable feature of social life in Russia, and accounts for many good things, probably for the Revolution itself, almost certainly for the unvaried success of the Red armies.'²⁵

Whilst in Russia, some interesting observations were made about some of the more famous features of the Soviet system, such as the question of how much freedom groups enjoyed in a country with a secret police force, the *Cheka*. This provoked different responses from the visitors. Ben Turner wrote that

All the stories of organised camouflage to deceive us are nonsense. No greater preparations were made for us than would naturally be made to welcome a friendly delegation coming to a country which had been closed for so long to the outside world. The assertion that the streets were specially cleaned and hardships hidden in order that we might not learn what the actual conditions are may be dismissed as so much moonshine. The Soviet representatives were quite open and frank and wanted us to see the worst as well as the

²⁴ Ibid, p.27

²⁵ Ibid, p.26

best...We had absolute freedom to go where we desired, to see whom we desired.²⁶

George Young, the special correspondent from the *Daily Herald* who was travelling with the party agreed with Turner, refuting allegations that delegates were not allowed to see everything they wanted. 'There has been absolutely no attempt to conceal anything from the visitors. The short-comings have been as easy to see as the fine things. Everywhere we have talked freely with the workers and the people in the streets.'²⁷

These accounts contradict what Snowden found, despite them being part of the same delegation. While pleased to learn that the Bolsheviks would let them see everything, at which she said '[t]his sounded splendid. We heaved a sigh of relief. We had been in mortal terror of being a conducted party'²⁸ the truth was somewhat different.

As events transpired, we were everywhere accompanied by representatives of the Authorities, who were sent, it was said, partly to act as interpreters and partly to protect us from counter-revolutionaries and Polish spies who might be lurking about with bombs!²⁹

Snowden claimed that they were often escorted by up to twenty people, who got 'fearfully in the way, and often crowded out members of the Delegation eager to get close to charts and maps and anxious to ask questions.'³⁰ Whether the "escorts" who showed the groups around were there out of kindness and to act as guides in a vast and bewildering place, or out of secretive necessity, was also open to interpretation.

Paul Winterton said that the Russians

...are by nature an hospitable race and prefer that their guests should not flounder about...This friendliness was real, not

²⁶ *Labour Leader*, 17 June 1920

²⁷ *Daily Herald*, 22 May 1920

²⁸ Snowden, *Bolshevik Russia*, p.48

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ *Ibid* pp.48-49

assumed...spontaneous, and not a calculated prelude to deception...far from wishing to conceal things, these Russians were usually naively frank.³¹

However, this should be seen in the context of a judgement on an earlier era of Russian society. A member of Petrashevsky's circle, (Petrashevsky was a nineteenth century Russian revolutionary) wrote that

[i]n Russia everything is a secret or a falsehood, and therefore one cannot have reliable information about anything...The policy of the government is to keep many things secret or to lie about them...Slaves willingly or unwillingly try to anticipate the wishes of their oppressors. Hence the tendency to secretiveness and to lie has become with us a habit.³²

Adam Ulam noted that this '...unfortunately is relevant not only to Nicholas I's times.'³³

At times, Snowden felt that she was a pawn in the Bolshevik's propaganda game, although she reflected that this was no worse than the anti-Bolshevik propaganda of the *Daily Mail*. She said that

It was frequently suggested...that "the representatives of the revolutionary working-class movement in Great Britain had come to bring greetings and assistance to the revolutionary Government of Russia." From this belief, or the affectation of it, sprang the clever notion of using us in every possible way to advance their propaganda. Immense public demonstrations...at which we were expected to make speeches were already arranged for us when we arrived there...On several occasions members of the Delegation addressed the troops in language eminently satisfying to the Bolshevik Commissars, and those like myself, who declined to do this on the ground that we had not come for such a purpose, became objects of suspicion and of quiet dislike.³⁴

Other aspects of the trip included going to bed very late, at the 'terribly un-English hour'³⁵ of two or three o'clock in the morning.

³¹ Winterton, *A Student in Russia*, p.23

³² Cited in A. B. Ulam, *The Bolsheviks*, Massachusetts, 1998, p.37

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Snowden, *Bolshevik Russia*, pp 50-51

³⁵ Ibid, p.52

People in Russia appear to be able to live without sleep. At any rate they never go to bed before the small hours of the morning...soon we became quite used to the sight of little children playing about at eleven and twelve at night, and to the spectacle of a ploughman ploughing his land at an hour when it was difficult to say whether twilight or the dawn lighted his labours.³⁶

She also recounted some of the more bizarre rituals of the new Soviet State. At their public reception in Petrograd, the Internationale was played to announce the arrival of the delegates. It was then played again when others entered late, when speeches were made and to welcome the President of the Soviet. She said that they learnt the tune to the song unforgettably that night 'for it was sung whole or in part, exactly seventeen times.'³⁷

Robert Williams and Clifford Allen also gave accounts of life in "normal Russia". Whilst in Petrograd, they shared an ordinary lunch with workers in a public restaurant where 'the meals are provided free for the workers as part of their wages.' They continued to say that '[t]he food was enough to sustain and supply bodily energy, but unsatisfactory to our unaccustomed palates, and we were made to feel the evidence of the infamous blockade'.³⁸

These animated accounts were more informative in the ways of Russian *life* than the official report. Stories about bedtime, singing and the ordinary life of Russian workers gave the British socialist just as much of an insight into the lives of Russians as information about the way the new soviet system worked. Of course, the delegates' report also informed its readers about the nature of Bolshevism and how the Allied blockade was affecting life in the new Russia, but the nature in which it was written confirms its official status. Whereas the accounts of Snowden, Allen and Williams considered Russian bedtime and food, the delegates' report offered few categorical

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid, p.55

³⁸ *Daily Herald*, 20 May 1920

opinions, saving itself more for a factual analysis of the situation. Graubard is absolutely right in his assessment of the report:

This report must by any standard be accounted a document of the greatest significance. Conceived in an objective spirit, and based on a judicious sifting of evidence, it served as a necessary corrective to some of the more biased judgements produced by men of the Lansbury school. The delegation visited Russia neither to praise nor to condemn but only to examine. Good and bad were discovered everywhere, never in perfect balance, and usually explainable by rational argument.³⁹

The purpose of the report was to be as scientific as possible, to research, and to report. The delegates produced a report notable for its clarity. When they did offer opinions, these tended to differ from the passionate pro-Bolshevism of Lansbury. While he wrote an affectionate description of Lenin, the official representatives of British Labour were far less impressionable when it came to describing the founder of the Bolshevik state. The philosopher Bertrand Russell, travelling with the party, found Lenin 'opinionated, narrowly orthodox and dictatorial' although he commented that he was also 'undeniably courageous and dedicated.'⁴⁰ Snowden met Lenin and accepted that one meeting would not entitle her 'to be dogmatic about...the character of Lenin. It is not possible to know anyone in so short a space of time.'⁴¹ But she said that

I have read much of what Lenin had written, and disagreed very profoundly with most of it; but I knew that he had kept together his Government in circumstances of tremendous difficulty and discouragement for more than two and a half years. One year after another, he and his tireless colleague, Trotsky, had overcome his country's enemies.⁴²

This point obviously interested British socialists. Here was a government that had come to power promising to build socialism and that had also kept power despite

³⁹ Graubard, *British Labour* p.217

⁴⁰ Cited in *ibid*, p.221

⁴¹ Snowden, *Bolshevik Russia*, p.115

⁴² *Ibid*

overwhelming pressure from the capitalist powers. Labour could find themselves in the same boat one day. Indeed Stafford Cripps argued that Labour's second government had been brought to an abrupt end in 1931 by unscrupulous and dark capitalist forces.

Snowden found Lenin's fanaticism impressive, claiming that this was his driving force. But 'his firm belief in the necessity of violence for the establishment throughout the world of his ideals makes one doubt miserably.'⁴³ She said that Lenin was a 'keen-brained, dogmatic professor in politics'⁴⁴, and it is clear that she quite liked him, if not his politics. Nevertheless, this highlights the main stumbling block for most of the delegates – the idea of a dictatorship of the proletariat. Whether this was in the form of violence against enemies or suppression of freedom of speech, whichever way they looked at it, the Bolsheviks implemented tactics abhorrent to the main British traditions of gradual reform (which prevailed for the most part of Labour's history, except for the short-lived but radical New Unionist period).

Bertrand Russell criticised Russia's friends abroad for thinking that "proletariat" meant "proletariat" but "dictatorship" did not mean "dictatorship". 'This' he said, 'was the opposite of the truth.'⁴⁵ He saw no sign of democracy being built in Russia, arguing that the soviets were just a way for the Communist Party to relay its orders. The delegates found that freedom in the Western sense was completely unknown – a point they utterly deplored and one that they believed was too high a price to pay for the benefits the revolution promised. However, Ben Turner put the Bolshevik's case. He said that they do not hide the fact that they use repressive measures.

They say that, so long as a great part of the world is plotting against them, they must have exceptional powers to arrest counter-revolutionaries, monarchists, and officers in the old White Guard who act as agents and spies for the enemies of Russia. They say

⁴³ Ibid p.117

⁴⁴ Ibid p.119

⁴⁵ Cited in Graubard, *British Labour*, p.220

“We are surrounded by war and we are going to protect the Revolution by all means possible.”⁴⁶

Snowden recounted numerous stories about the suppression of liberty, such as being told by the chairman of the *Cheka* that nobody ‘had been shot without a fair trial’ and that ‘no great tyranny was exercised.’⁴⁷ Her translator’s eyes were ‘swimming with tears’ as she told her ‘[i]t is hard for me to hear these replies and be able to say nothing.’ Snowden left the room ‘cold with horror and dislike, for I knew without the implication of the interpreter’s words that much of what had been said to us was absolutely untrue.’⁴⁸ However, she still tried to put forward a balanced account, making it clear that the opponents of Bolshevik rule, the Whites, were more brutal.

It is no consolation to me to learn, as I did, that the White Terror was even worse. I am absolutely satisfied on the evidence I have seen, that where the Red Terror has slain its thousands the White Terror has destroyed its tens of thousands.⁴⁹

However, despite her attempts to be balanced, pro-Soviet supporters criticised her for only looking for the negative aspects. Sylvia Pankhurst visited Soviet Russia soon after Snowden left, and she claimed that

Mrs Philip Snowden proved one of the most obstinately determined not to be influenced by the prevailing atmosphere. She bolstered up her original prejudices by visits to counter-revolutionaries and anti-Communists, who supplied her with a jumble of feeble and mutually conflicting stories...⁵⁰

Communist supporters always claimed that critics – even those who accepted that some elements of the new system were positive – were always looking for ways to highlight the negative.

⁴⁶ *Labour Leader*, June 17 1920

⁴⁷ Snowden, *Bolshevik Russia*, p.159

⁴⁸ *Ibid* p.159

⁴⁹ *Ibid* p.161

⁵⁰ S. Pankhurst, *Soviet Russia as I saw it*, London, 1921, p.163

The conclusion of the delegates' report highlighted the different attitudes within the group, and therefore the different attitudes that were prevalent within the party itself. Some delegates had their views confirmed, that this was a model of socialism that Britain could follow, and that it *was* socialism that was being constructed in Russia. Others had their hopes shattered by their experiences of Leninist socialism. There appears to be, however, no attempt to conclude whether Lenin's interpretation of Marx was indeed actual Marxism in practice. The final group had their doubts confirmed – that this primitive form of socialism was fine for the Russians, but could certainly not work in Britain. Snowden wrote that some of the delegates left Russia 'filled with uncritical enthusiasm for the *Bolsheviki*; others were bitterly disappointed in their expectations; others again were confirmed in former opinions.'⁵¹

One delegate told her that

I went without the slightest bias in the world against what I regarded as a very big thing, the establishment of a great Socialist Republic, and I have come out with a deep feeling of disappointment. There is practically no Socialism in Russia worthy of the name. And the people are utterly wretched.⁵²

Most delegates agreed on one point, however, and this was that it was the Allied intervention, and not Lenin, that was responsible for the problems that Soviet Russia faced. They asserted that the militarism that existed in the country was a consequence of the Civil War, and that this should be concluded as quickly as possible. They saw the war as a 'crime in its inception and a blunder in its continuance.'⁵³

The report concluded that:

The Russian Revolution has not had a fair chance. We cannot say whether, in normal conditions, this particular experiment would have been a success or failure. The conditions have been such that

⁵¹ Snowden, *Bolshevik Russia*, p.179

⁵² Ibid p.180

⁵³ Ibid p.179

would have rendered the task of social transformation extraordinarily difficult, whoever had attempted it and whatever had been the means adopted. We cannot forget that the responsibility for these conditions resulting from foreign interference rests not upon the revolutionaries of Russia, but upon the capitalist Governments.⁵⁴

Ethel Snowden's conclusion shares these sentiments. Summing up how she viewed the results of the tour, she wrote that

I am not hostile to the Russian Revolution which the tyrannous regime of the Czars (sic) made necessary and inevitable; but I am utterly opposed to the *coup d'etat* of the Bolsheviki, as I should be to the seizing of power by any small minority of the people; for out of this action has sprung a large part of the misery the unhappy people of Russia endure.⁵⁵

The last part of this statement is a direct contradiction to how the other delegates felt. Unlike her comrades who blamed the capitalists, Snowden blamed the Bolshevik seizure of power for the position Russia found herself in. But it was not reasonable to judge Bolshevism only on what it had achieved by the time of her visit. For those living under the Bolshevik system, she concluded that 'Bolshevism is a failure.'⁵⁶ However, this was inevitable because of the great difficulties that were facing Russia.

Alien invasion, internal disorder, counter-revolutionary activities, scarcities of necessities of all sorts, the blockade of Russia – all these things made it quite impossible for the Russian Revolutionary Government with the best brains and the finest intentions in the world to carry out more than a fraction of its programme in a very imperfect manner. The wonder is not that they have failed to establish Socialism, but that they have successfully accomplished so much that is good.⁵⁷

It must be assumed that the good Snowden saw was the fact that the Tsarist Autocracy was gone, and in its place was a government willing to use harsh measures to outlaw

⁵⁴ *Labour Delegation Report*, p.27

⁵⁵ Snowden, *Bolshevik Russia*, p.11

⁵⁶ *Ibid* p.180

⁵⁷ *Ibid* p.181

some of the more decadent ills of society (such as alcoholism), and also willing to pursue socialist goals, even if

Soviet Russia could teach Western Europe nothing and that Socialism would prevail in Great Britain long before it would in Russia. Dr. Guest expressed the same view, and said the delegation had been well received in Russia, but that their views had won little sympathy.⁵⁸

It is clear from this that certain sections of the Labour Party would not be won over to the ideas that argued that extreme measures were needed to defeat capitalism. For Ethel Snowden, the politics of Soviet Russia offered nothing to Britain.

Ramsay MacDonald agreed and this was demonstrated by the fact that he chose to visit Menshevik Georgia rather than Bolshevik Russia, and it was this visit that shaped his own views of Bolshevism. The events that took place in the Menshevik Republic of Georgia meant that MacDonald broke completely with any sympathy he had for Lenin's regime. Georgia was a country that had undergone revolution and successfully established a socialist democracy, but not under the influence of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

The socialist style of Georgia, and *not* Bolshevik Russia, was how MacDonald saw a future socialist Britain. It is likely that this was the break that ensured that Labour's leaders would not see Soviet Russia as a total exemplar. While there were times later in the 1920s and 1930s when Labour intellectuals, rank and file members and even leading figures supported the USSR and Soviet policy, such as planning, it was Ramsay MacDonald's Georgian experience, together with Labour's history, that ensured it would not become a willing Soviet satellite.

The Georgian Socialists are too good ILPers to play monkey tricks with dictatorships or any such varieties. They are democrats. They

⁵⁸ *The Daily Herald*, 24 June, 1920

have had their revolution – social as well as political – without shooting an opponent, except when they were invaded, without suppressing a journal...[the Georgian socialist] has had his Soviet time, but he very soon ended it. He created it when the first Russian Revolution took place, but he at once elected a Constituent Assembly, formed a temporary coalition, held a regular general election on adult suffrage, with full protection for all minorities...The Russian conception of government is, for me, fundamentally bad, the Georgian fundamentally good...Georgia [must]...at once [be] recognised as an independent state and admitted into the League of Nations.⁵⁹

Once the Bolsheviks had triumphed in Georgia, MacDonald's flirtation with revolutionary socialism, which began in Leeds in 1917 but never grew into anything more than support for other nations' right to tread this path, ended. Yet despite bitter disappointment that Menshevism could not prevail in this region, the pragmatic MacDonald still sought to bring Leninist Russia into contact with Britain. Ideological links had been broken, but MacDonald saw a potential way out of Britain's troubles in dealing with Russia.

These three visits each represent the most prevalent schools of thought that dominated Labourites' understanding of Soviet Russia at this time, and thus laid the foundations for Labour's overall attitude to the USSR in the inter-war years. Lansbury, the most uncritical visitor, represented the smallest group within the Labour Party throughout the 1920s and 1930s - those who gave their support to the revolution and to Soviet Socialism, without wishing to break with the party and join the newly formed Communist Party of Great Britain (termed 'fellow travellers'). Lansbury largely supported what the Bolsheviks were trying to do, and *What I Saw in Russia* presented a favourable account of life in Leninist Russia. Aside from the obvious facts about the deaths during the Red Terror and the problem of child poverty, the image portrayed in the book is one of hope that socialism could and would be constructed.

⁵⁹ *Labour Leader*, 21 October 1920

The Labour Party and Trade Union Delegation represented the majority of the party who were critical yet understanding of what the Russians were trying to do. There was widespread support for closer links with Russia, although not to the extent that invoked support for communism in Britain. The overall findings suggested that Russia's problems were caused by the circumstances left to the Bolsheviks by the *ancien régime*, but some delegates also saw no solution in Bolshevik ideology. The suppression of liberty and clear use of dictatorial powers by the ruling party did not please the delegates. However, the fact that there was a party in power that favoured socialist ideals was better than either a capitalist government or Tsarist autocracy, especially given the pressure from hostile forces during the Civil War. The final approach was followed by some of the leaders of the movement who favoured the more gradualist form of socialism discussed elsewhere, and they could find solace in MacDonald's overall argument that Bolshevism was not the right approach to win the people over to socialism.

The visits helped to influence party policy in two ways. Firstly, it meant that shaping policy concerning Soviet Russia was more informed than it would have been without first-hand experience. This fact was given more significance as the party's future Prime Minister had made the journey to see an alternative to Bolshevism, which he saw as more relevant to how he interpreted socialism. MacDonald's own views, and those of the delegates who visited Bolshevik Russia, helped to shape Labour Party opinion for years to come.

Secondly, the most important decision agreed upon was that Russians should be allowed to experiment with whatever form of government they saw fit. Capitalist powers should not be allowed to interfere in the internal politics of Russia, and this opinion had been gaining support in the party for some time, as is evident from the view put forward by the ACIQ and the *New Statesman and Nation* detailed elsewhere. This understanding of sovereignty can be reconciled with moderate Labour leaders'

understanding of international affairs. Internationalism had taken on a new meaning for some in the party. The original meaning of international solidarity with the workers of the world was no longer as important as security and safety (and possibly socialism), which were to be promoted through agreements with the world's governments. The original idea was still there, but the emphasis and means had changed.

Once Labour had decided that the Bolsheviks were not going to be removed from power, and this was by no means a certainty at this time, it followed that a specific policy was needed, and this was that immediate negotiations over trade should be opened, and normal diplomatic relations should be resumed at once. Labour began to realise the necessity of befriending Soviet Russia, and this policy was fulfilled in 1924 when the short-lived Labour Government became the first Government to officially recognise the Soviet Union.

3.2 A visit to post-Leninist Russia

Soon after the Labour Government fell in October 1924, the British Trades Union Delegation went to the Soviet Union and visited various regions including Moscow, Kharkov, the Caucasus and Baku. This was the first organised labour group from Britain to visit Russia since the death of Lenin. This is important, as it gave the members of the party the opportunity to compare post-Leninist Russia with the reports of the earlier visitors who were researching the newly revolutionised Russia. The members in this delegation were Albert Purcell, the TUC Chairman, Ben Tillett, the political secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, John Bromley MP, a member of the TUC General Council, Alan Findlay, Herbert Smith, President of the Yorkshire Miners' Association, John Turner, Fred Bramley, Secretary of the TUC General Council, Harold G. Grenfell, A. R. McDonell and George Young.

While the purpose of the visit was research, it would seem that the delegates' agenda was to prove that socialism was being built in the Soviet Union, and that, whilst there were some difficulties and problems, on the whole the experiment was working. Evidence for this is in a November issue of *Izvestiya* in 1924. Next to sketches of the delegates, the paper allowed delegates to write comments before they even went anywhere in Russia. Albert Purcell wrote 'Soviet Russia – the first bright jewel in the world's Working Class Crown'; John Bromley: 'Long Live the workers of Soviet Russia'; Ben Tillett – 'Soviet Russia is the hope of the world's workers' and Allan Findlay wrote 'Let the Workers live.'⁶⁰ Of course there could also have been an element of trying to flatter their hosts in order to curry favour as well.

There are a number of reasons as to why the members travelling in this party were more willing to accept what they saw and what they were told whilst in the USSR. The first reason is that people like Ben Turner had been at the front of the radical struggle in the trade unions in the late nineteenth century in Britain, which saw him lead the London Dock Strike in 1889, as the "new unions" turned more and more to direct action. In 1908 Tillett wrote *Is the Parliamentary Party a Failure*, a pamphlet describing non-socialist Labour MPs as hypocrites who repaid 'with gross betrayal the class that willingly supports them'.⁶¹ Certain members of this party were not sober socialists like those in 1920, and were more than willing to embrace socialism brought to power through direct action rather than wait for socialism through parliament.

The second reason that helps to explain the militant attitudes of the members is the political climate at the time in Britain. After the revolutions of 1917 and the forming of the CPGB, Russia and communism caught the attention of more than just a few people. This is not to say that there was any mass movement towards communism, but it reflected a growing, albeit slow, trend within the British working class, towards

⁶⁰ *Izvestiya*, 12 November, 1924

⁶¹ Cited in Foote, *Labour Party, Political Thought*, p.47

supporting communism. Obviously there was no gigantic breakthrough for the Communist Party, but the membership of this revolutionary body was increasing in these years. It rose from over 4000 at the end of 1924 to over 11,000 at the end of 1926 (incorporating the General Strike of this year).

This highlights the fact that workers had become more radical since the end of World War One and the Russian Revolution, and the consequence of this was that Labourites were often willing to side with the Russians in international disputes. The refusal of London dockers not to load the *Jolly George* ship with munitions for Polish soldiers fighting against the Red Army in 1920 is one such example, and this helped bring British intervention in the Russian Civil War to an end. The lack of any significant breakthrough to place Britain on the road to socialism in the post-war years, especially while Labour was in power, also led people to look elsewhere for ideas. Indeed, within the party itself, there was a small but growing support for letting the Communist Party affiliate to Labour. Hugh Armstrong Clegg claims that while ‘the Communist Party attracted attention out of all proportion to its membership’,

[t]he Independent Labour Party, claiming ten times as many members, also felt the attraction of the Russian revolution and the ‘workers’ state’ now established in Russia and spent much of their energy in the immediate postwar years...pursuing the possibility of affiliation to the Communist International...⁶²

The actual content of the report highlights how the 1924 delegation looked at similar aspects of Soviet life to that of the 1920 delegation. The report they produced often compared conditions in Russia with those seen by Snowden’s group, and looked at what had changed in those four years. There were some major differences compared with 1920. The Civil War was over, and the delegation was visiting a different country. The 1920 group had gone to Soviet Russia, whereas the 1924 visitors were in

⁶² Clegg, H. A. *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889, Volume II 1911-1933*, Oxford, 1987, p.360

the Soviet Union, formed in 1923. Lenin was gone, and the economy had changed significantly.

In 1920, the delegates witnessed War Communism – a type of economic system specific to the Leninist period that saw large-scale nationalisation try to bring industry under the control of the Bolshevik Government. The 1924 group however, looked at the New Economic Policy, (NEP), which allowed some measure of private trade amongst citizens. In comparing the situation, Tillett and his comrades noted that Snowden's group called War Communism 'an experiment that must get more and more extreme until it exploded.'⁶³

The 1924 party found that the economic situation had improved. They saw NEP as the first and most fundamental compromise of the Soviet regime, commenting that this 'was not only viable, but [it] has real vitality and stimulates the economic recovery that peace has now made possible.'⁶⁴ As is shown elsewhere, some Labourites had already begun to call for greater state intervention in the economy, arguing that the war years showed how planning in the economy was more beneficial than unreliable markets. The controlled reintroduction of markets to Russia meant that it looked more like an economy run by leftist social democrats rather than communist revolutionaries. Lenin himself admitted that there was an element of 'state capitalism' to it. And this helped to define Labour's own theories on planning the economy, which found widespread support in the Labour Party in the 1930s and this laid the foundations for the mixed economy introduced by the post-war Attlee Government.

When the TUC delegates looked at the political system, they noted that despite the lack of oppositional press, there was a 'very considerable latitude of criticism allowed' which 'took the form of open discussion on social and economic

⁶³ *The Official Report of the British Trade Union Delegation to Russia in November and December 1924*, London, 1925, p.59

⁶⁴ *Ibid*

questions.’⁶⁵ They did, however, note that ‘[n]o attack on the Communist Party is permitted’.⁶⁶ They admitted that this open discussion was only permitted within the confines of the party, and that free speech of the type known in England was non-existent.

They also found that political participation was largely confined to those who supported the ruling party. Participation was ‘still severely restricted, and the system has as yet been kept under close control by its originators with the tacit consent of the immense majority of their fellow electors.’⁶⁷ This clearly differed from the Labour Party which had altered its constitution after the end of World War One to allow individual membership as it looked for mass membership as opposed to the vanguard elitism of the Bolsheviks.

Despite finding that only membership of the Communist Party allowed some kind of freedom of speech, the members so wanted to see the meek inherit the earth in a socialist utopia, that they still found a way to argue that this system of politics worked. Such a system was not undemocratic ‘in the widest sense of the word’, as in many respects ‘the individual [has] a more real and reasonable opportunity of participation in public affairs than does parliamentary and party government.’⁶⁸ This was fine, of course, if the individual concerned was a Communist Party member, but the delegates do not mention how things were for non-Party members.

The visitors found that ‘Communism in one aspect can best be understood in its origin as a new Religious Order of devotion and discipline’⁶⁹, and claimed that Lenin’s international representatives could be seen as missionaries. Indeed, the cult that surrounded Lenin prompted the observation that Karl Marx and Lenin had replaced

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.121

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.17

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid, p.12

God and the Tsar. Social and religious conditions, and law and order were also surveyed. This was continuing the idea that it was best to report home with facts about life in the USSR that could be easily understood by the British worker.

According to Tillett's comrades, 'public order is now on a footing well above that in most continental countries, [and] justice is equitably enforced in the new courts.'⁷⁰ It was found that the social system as applied in Russia would not 'be acceptable, in its entirety' in Britain, because Russian people are more susceptible to mass organisation, 'and are socially less individualistic than the British.'⁷¹ They also found that 'the moral tone is likely to be greatly improved by the new status acquired by women.'⁷²

The conclusion that the delegation reached was that the USSR was 'a strong and stable state' whose 'Government is based firmly on a system of State Socialism that has the active support of a large majority of the peasants...'⁷³ It found that the machinery of government, while 'fundamentally different from that of other states' worked well, and that it represented better government than anything Russia had known before. The travellers conceded that some rights had been eroded, such as the right to opposition. Although they claimed that this was 'essential to political liberty elsewhere' they argued that this caused no resistance 'partly because these rights have been replaced by others of greater value under the Soviet system, and partly because recent movements have been steadily towards their restoration.'⁷⁴ Finally, the delegates agreed that the Soviet Union was well worth more foreign study.

The main point that is evident from this report is that it largely supported what was happening in Russia, and further reports throughout the 1920s helped to keep this

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.98

⁷¹ Ibid, p.108

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid, p.171

⁷⁴ Ibid

support alive inside the Labour Party. H. C. Stevens wrote in the *New Leader* that he had ‘excellent opportunities for observation’ and argued that Russian workers ‘are still, in the main, wholehearted supporters of the present regime.’⁷⁵ His reasoning behind this assertion was the fact that the Russian people had not overthrown the government yet, ‘something the Russian people are able to do’⁷⁶ meant that they were happy enough with the Communist programme. ‘It is not a satisfactory answer to say that the tyranny is too efficient and complete. As a matter of fact very few of the workers have any consciousness of the existence of tyranny.’⁷⁷ While admitting that the Communist regime was a dictatorship, he said that ‘[t]he worker has gained substantially as a worker. The eight-hour day; the medical care; the maternity provisions; the months cheap holiday every year...the first opportunities in education for his children; in housing accommodation...’⁷⁸

On his return to the Soviet Union in August 1926 George Lansbury wrote an article for *Izvestiya*, in which he supported the views of Stevens. Lansbury found that Russian citizens ‘whether in the fields, factories...mines, on the railways...are living in far better conditions.’⁷⁹ Life, he said, ‘was spouting like an inexhaustible fountain.’⁸⁰ It is not difficult to see why the Russian experiment remained interesting to the British working class. Such reporting targeted issues important to ordinary people in Britain. According to these accounts, socialism really could bring about improvements to everyday life outside of the workplace as well as inside the factory.

Overall these views can be seen as a product of their time and the TUC report reflected a growing interest in left-wing alternatives to the traditional, gradualist way the Labour Party sought social and economic change. The promise of socialism in the

⁷⁵ *New Leader*, 2 January 1925

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ *Izvestiya*, 29 August 1926

⁸⁰ Ibid

Soviet Union – the process of which had already been started - was perhaps more appealing than waiting for Labour to regain power. This was particularly important given the failure of the 1924 government to introduce any recognisably socialist policies.

While information from the 1920 delegates helped Labour's leadership to form a specific policy towards the USSR when it dealt with the Kremlin in 1924, this visit helped to define some more of Labour's theoretical boundaries. The Labour leadership was concerned with continued attempts by the CPGB to affiliate to the party, and the evidence from the delegates about the nature and tactics of the CPSU confirmed that their position was the correct one to take. Labour was not an elitist party with a small membership. Indeed, for the most part, the party had the general support of its members and it did not therefore want to ally itself politically with a party that had strong connections with a body such as the CPSU.

Freedom of expression was still a factor of Labour Party politics (at least until the more ideologically charged thirties when Stafford Cripps was expelled for failure to toe the party line). The party was, first and foremost, a mass membership party with a constitution that demanded loyalty to the cause, but also freedom within that set up. This issue also came to the fore in the 1930s when, as is shown elsewhere, a significant section of the membership defied their leaders' demands to have no contact with communists in a united front against fascism.

However, Labour was also willing to learn from the Soviet Union, and this helped to define its thinking on the economy. While there was certainly no fundamental break with the orthodoxy of the free market, so loved by Philip Snowden, there was an acceptance that some new thinking was called for. The intricacies of Labour's economic thought are dealt with later, but the mixed economy witnessed by the TUC delegation offered hope to those socialists who had criticised the random nature and

pro-consumerist, anti-producer position of capitalism. NEP offered a new vision of a planned economy that could still accommodate capitalism. It is here that the corporatist-socialist thinking that defined Labour's economic thought in the 1930s began to emerge, and this distinguished the Labour Party from all the other political parties, from the Conservatives on the right to the CPGB on the left.

On the whole, by the end of the 1920s the Labour Party's interest in the USSR had not waned and this was largely due to the travellers' tales. The rank and file, and to a greater extent the intellectuals of the Labour Party, were still enamoured with communism in the Soviet Union. Neal Wood noted that

For many intellectuals Soviet Russia was the one hope of the future. Books and articles favourably reporting every aspect of Soviet life were eagerly devoured by a hungry audience. Pilgrimages to this new land of promise were made by British people from every walk of life.⁸¹

As the next decade began Kingsley Martin, editor of the *New Statesman*, wrote that even Lord Lothian gave 'a remarkable speech at the London School of Economics ...advising us to learn from Russia instead of abus[e] her.'⁸² The policies that Labour adopted in the twenties show how the party adapted to the situation. And the mood of the party to some extent shows how it did learn from the USSR. In its economic thought this had a positive influence as the party looked at NEP, while in terms of party democracy Labour was certainly unlikely to follow the methods and tactics of the CPSU.

By the early 1930s, the backdrop to the visits had altered. The economic depression and a questioning of Labour's faith in parliamentary methods meant that a renewed interest in Soviet affairs to some extent threatened Labour's traditional gradualism. Of course, the moderate leaders still espoused non-revolutionary methods to reach the

⁸¹ N. Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, London, 1959, p. 42

⁸² *New Statesman and Nation*, 4 July 1931

New Jerusalem but others were not so sure, as this had brought only limited results in the short-lived Labour Government of 1924 and the MacDonald government.

As Andrew Williams notes, by late 1931 after Ramsay MacDonald's split from Labour 'the atmosphere of defeat made many, if not most members of the Labour Party look elsewhere than Westminster for inspiration...'⁸³ The party was certainly open to ideas from other models of progressive politics, such as the USA and Sweden, but the most favoured option was still the USSR as this offered a total break with capitalism, which appeared to many as if it was about to collapse, and thus ensured a steady flow of visitors in the 1930s.

3.3 Stalin's Russia through Labour eyes

The nature of the new Stalinist dictatorship was of paramount interest to Labourites in the early thirties. In January 1931 the *New Statesman* noted how the CPSU was becoming more of a personalised dictatorship with Stalin assuming the leading role and its words have been proved correct by history.

Since the death of Lenin...the dictatorship of Stalin has been established, not by any triumphant victory over a foreign enemy or even over Russians of other political persuasions, but by gradual yet relentless elimination of any comrade in his own party who might endanger the Stalin leadership.⁸⁴

The article continued to say that

[a]cting in the sacred name of Lenin, Stalin has ostracised or exiled most of the men on whom Lenin relied for the successful carrying out of the October revolution. Trotsky, Zinovieff, (sic) Kameneff, (sic) Rakovsky were the first to be subjected to this Pride's purge. Tomsky, once the tribal god of the Russian Trade Unions, has suffered the same fate. Even Rykoff, (sic) that most harmless of Bolshevik mandarins, has had to endure the degradation of public

⁸³ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.183

⁸⁴ *New Statesman and Nation*, January 3 1931

recantation and enforced leave of absence, and, finally, of enforced resignation. Bukharin, the privileged interpreter of Lenin and the drafter of the Communist programme, is now denounced openly in the official Bolshevik press as Mr Facing-Both-Ways and as the leader of the opportunists.⁸⁵

Of course, the Labour leadership already knew much of this, which is why they were willing to negotiate trade deals with the Soviet Government, but keen to put as much distance as possible between the British labour movement and the Russian concept of socialism. For ordinary Labour members though, these developments in Moscow were news. But such opinions were not categorical and there were those who refuted the allegations that Stalin was a dictator. C. M. Lloyd wrote about his visit to the USSR in the *New Statesman and Nation* in 1931, and took up a contradictory position to the previous article.

Lloyd described Stalin not as a dictator, but instead as ‘the most powerful individual in the State, but he is neither theoretically nor actually an absolute monarch.’⁸⁶ He continues to claim that the Dictatorship of the Proletariat is

a system of control that vies with and surpasses that of Italian Fascism in its ingenuity and its effectiveness. It is a regime which is repugnant to British traditions of liberty. But one must put aside prejudice in order to understand it. It is not all brutal violence and malevolent cunning.⁸⁷

While agreeing with critics of the regime that this constitutes a dictatorship *over* the proletariat, he points out that the Communists ‘conceive this dictatorship as a trusteeship, and, moreover, they are not an entirely alien body, a class with separate interests.’⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ *The New Statesman and Nation*, November 28 1931

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid

Even the *Daily Herald* lent itself to this view. An article in March 1930 described how Stalin had personally ordered a change in policy that would loosen the CPSU's tight grip on the peasantry and allow the 'voluntary entrance and exit of members of collective farms'⁸⁹, implying that Stalin did not know that the peasants were being victimised. The *Herald* was reporting Stalin's 'Dizzy with Success' article in *Pravda*, and the story that followed said that '[s]ince he took to announcing special advantages for members of collective farms, and a moderation of the methods of collectivisation, his prestige among the peasants has risen sky high.'⁹⁰

According to the *Herald*, 'Stalin is at present receiving daily mailbags containing letters and questions from the most distant villages of the Soviet Union. The peasant looks up to him as a protector against arbitrary local officialdom.'⁹¹ While such views may have been expected in the pages of the *Daily Herald* whilst George Lansbury was involved, the paper had been under trade union control since 1922, and tended to reflect the more moderate views of the union and party leadership. Yet such a pro-Soviet view here can be attributed to the fact that Henderson was negotiating a new trade deal with the Russians at this time.

The ILP's paper, the *New Leader*, aired an increasingly pro-Soviet view, thanks partly to Anna Louise Strong, a journalist who had lived in Russia since the early 1920s. The *New Leader* described her as an 'ardent friend of the Soviet Government,'⁹² and in 1924 she wrote *The First Time in History*, which described the successes that the Russian Government had had so far. Leon Trotsky wrote the introduction, and described Strong's approach – one that was 'not from the aesthetic, or contemplative point of view, but from the point of action' – as 'the only correct one'.⁹³ A fantastic

⁸⁹ *The Daily Herald*, March 26 1930

⁹⁰ *The Daily Herald*, April 8 1930

⁹¹ *Ibid*

⁹² *New Leader*, June 20 1930

⁹³ A. L. Strong, *The First Time in History*, London, 1924, p.7

twist of historical irony later saw Strong become one of the most tenacious pro-Stalinists to write in the Labour press.⁹⁴

Her work often appeared in the *New Leader*, and strove to put forward the most positive of pictures of Stalin's Russia. Her articles included 'Stalin unites Russia' and 'Wonder Years of Russian Socialism'⁹⁵ and extolled the virtues of life in the workers' paradise. After claiming, in the first article, how wonderful Stalin was, Strong said 'Russia will use this power to promote world revolution! There may be a united soviet state of Europe under Russian domination by 1950, or sooner.'⁹⁶ When describing the 'wonder years of Russian socialism' Strong neglects to mention the human cost that came with industrialisation and collectivisation. It must be assumed that this could not have been hidden to someone who spent so much time in the USSR, and therefore that she accepted it as an inevitable consequence of building socialism.

Such reports helped to create a utopian vision of the USSR that contradicted the stories in the *New Statesman* of personal dictatorship and the elimination of rivals for Stalin's power. Ironically, the views of the Labourites who established the *New Statesman*, the ardent Fabians Sydney and Beatrice Webb, failed to support the opinions espoused in that journal, after they visited the USSR in 1932. They were not the only Fabians to go to the USSR in this period, as the New Fabian Research Bureau also made the trip. So too did the Webb's Fabian friend George Bernard Shaw.

⁹⁴ There was another, sad, twist in store for Anna Louise Strong. Her loyal support for the Stalinist system did not save her from becoming a victim of its arbitrary repression, as in 1949 she was taken to the Lubyanka and interrogated by the OGPU. She was then abandoned on the Polish border and denounced on Soviet radio as a spy. For more details, see D. Cate, *The Fellow Travellers*, pp.74-75

⁹⁵ *New Leader*, July 25, 1930

⁹⁶ *New Leader*, March 21, 1930

3.4 Fabian gradualists in revolutionary Russia

The conversion of Bernard Shaw to Soviet Communism began a trend that saw Fabian socialists extol the virtues of the Stalinist system. The process began in 1931 with Shaw's visit to the USSR and was completed when the Webbs followed a year later. It is fair to say that the Stalinist leadership represented a core element of Fabian socialism, the concept that an elite should head the movement that would construct socialism. This was one of the main reasons why Fabians felt able to support the methods of Stalin. Gareth Griffith said that Shaw is mentioned in relation to political thought only as a supporter of 'various forms of dictatorship – proletarian or otherwise.'⁹⁷ He argued that this is

either in connection with the elitist tendencies in Fabianism, which culminated in his support for the Stalinist conception of state-worship in the 1930s, or else his name is to be found in the long list of literary proto-fascists, fellow travellers with Hitler and Mussolini, those fake emblems of the collectivist politics of virtue.⁹⁸

Shaw spent ten days in the USSR with Lady Astor – the more questioning and critical of the two – and this was widely publicised in the USSR. Shaw offered no criticism of the world he had found, yet his claims that Russia was living in an atmosphere of hope and security not seen in any capitalist country were greeted with derision. Griffith cites one damning example. 'The lengthening obscenity of ignorant or indifferent tourists, disporting themselves cheerily on the aching body of Russia, seemed summed up in this cavorting old man, in his blanket endorsement of what he would not understand.'⁹⁹

⁹⁷ G. Griffith, *Socialism and Superior Brains. The Political Thought of Bernard Shaw*, London, 1993, p.243

⁹⁸ Ibid

⁹⁹ Cited, *ibid*, p.243

Dmitri Shostakovich, the famous Russian musician, made his feelings clear about Shaw, whom he sarcastically referred to as a 'famous humanist'. Responding to Shaw's famous claim that there was no hunger in the USSR (even throwing out his food as he crossed the border into Russia to make his point), Shostakovich said

[i]t was Shaw who announced on his return from the Soviet Union, "Hunger in Russia? Nonsense. I've never been fed as well anywhere as in Moscow." Millions were going hungry then and several million peasants died of starvation. And yet people are delighted by Shaw, by his wit and courage. I have my own opinion on that...¹⁰⁰

He also scoffed at Shaw's comment '[y]ou won't frighten me with the word 'dictator'' saying '[n]aturally, why should Shaw be frightened? There weren't any in England, where he lived. I think the last dictator had been Cromwell.'¹⁰¹ This demonstrates one of two possibilities. It either shows a complete shift in the opinions of Russians since the 1920s when the visitors were welcomed with open arms and long passages in the Soviet press. Or it represents the true feelings of Soviet citizens who saw the truth of what was happening in their country but could not understand why foreigners failed to.

Shostakovich's comment that people were delighted by Shaw makes it difficult not to accept that his words about the Soviet Union would not have been greeted with the same enthusiasm. Andrew Williams points out that, as Shaw was a founder of the Fabian Society with the Webbs, 'he still had a role as 'opinion leader' in the Labour Party.'¹⁰² But he also claims that, while one commentator noted that Shaw had a 'bigger audience than anybody else on Earth', '[i]t is very difficult to ascertain to what extent Shaw was taken seriously within the Labour Party, and to what extent he was seen as the court jester.'¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ S. Volkov, (ed) *Testimony. The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, London, 1979, p.200

¹⁰¹ Ibid

¹⁰² Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.145

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.146. The 'bigger audience' comment was made by a Co-operative member who visited Russia in 1930

Shaw's conversion to Stalinism should not be seen as a surprise. It represents not only the elitism of the Fabian theory of constructing socialism, but combined Shaw's hope for the future (there was nothing different here than with many other socialist visitors from Britain) with the way he was treated while in the USSR. Witnessing Shaw's 70th birthday in celebrations in Moscow, the Soviet writer Lev Razgon noted that he was greeted as if it were Stalin's own birthday. Shaw himself told an actress friend of his that 'never in my life have I enjoyed a journey so much. You would have been disgusted at my reception as a Grand Old Man of Socialism, my smilings and wavings and posings and speech makings; but it made things very smooth for us all.'¹⁰⁴

Shaw later endorsed Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy, even to the point of getting the three dictators mixed up, and this fact demonstrates that it was perhaps the elitism of Fabianism, rather than the end result, that excited George Bernard Shaw. He represented the very essence of fellow-travelling as described by Trotsky: 'A whole generation of the 'left' intelligentsia has...turned its eyes eastwards and has tied...its fate not so much to the revolutionary working class as to a victorious revolution, which is not the same.'¹⁰⁵

Like George Bernard Shaw's visit, the journey made by Sidney and Beatrice Webb has been the subject of much discussion. Yet, again like Shaw's visit, it is impossible to write about the visits made by Labourites to the Soviet Union without mentioning the conversion of the original Fabians to Stalinism, and the background to their visit is worth noting. Until Shaw's journey to Russia, both Sidney and Beatrice had been critical, though not hateful, of the USSR. They saved their loathing for the CPGB and Comintern, and this was entirely in line with the wider view held in the Labour Party, which remained wary of the Communist movement in Britain. There were, however,

¹⁰⁴ Cited, Griffith, *Socialism and Superior Brains* p.244

¹⁰⁵ Cited, Cate, *The Fellow Travellers*, p.2

three definite turning points that saw the Webbs begin their love affair with Russian Communism.

The first was Shaw's conversion. Lisanne Radice argues that Shaw's support of the Soviet Union 'was bound to add to Beatrice's fascination and eagerness to visit Russia.'¹⁰⁶ She cites an entry in Beatrice's diary in August as an example. 'Russian revolution with pure Fabianism – Lenin and Stalin had recognised the '*Inevitability of gradualness*'!'¹⁰⁷ The second was the friendship that the Webbs had developed with the Soviet Ambassadors in London. Gregori Sokolnikov created a good impression on the Webbs, and was the first to urge them to go to Russia and see things for themselves.

And according to Williams, Sokolnikov's replacement Ivan Maisky had more of an influence on them.¹⁰⁸ The final turning point was the general atmosphere in the Labour Party in this period. Not only was there much confusion and anger after MacDonald's formation of a National Government, but also the view that capitalism was closer to collapse than ever before had permeated the party more than ever. Evidence for this is discussed elsewhere when the 1932 Labour Party Conference in Leicester, often cited as the most left-wing in this period, is assessed. All of this supports a comment made by William Gillies, the head of Labour's International Department, to the Secretary of the Labour and Socialist International, Friedrich Adler. He said that 'I am afraid that he [Sidney] is already infected. I have already said, after a conversation with him yesterday, that he knows, before he goes, what he will write on his return.'¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ L. Radice, *Beatrice and Sidney Webb*, Basingstoke, 1984, p.295

¹⁰⁷ Cited, *ibid*, p.294 (original emphasis)

¹⁰⁸ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.187

¹⁰⁹ W. Gillies, WG/RUS/13, National Museum of Labour History, Manchester

The Webbs' views were discussed by Beatrice in an interview, 'What I think of Soviet Russia', in the *New Clarion* in October 1932. In the interview, she relates how material comforts were somewhat less than she was used to. 'It is no pleasure' said Beatrice 'for those used to material comforts to travel in Russia to-day. But as material wealth is the world's standard of judgement, this is bad for Russia's immediate influence on the rest of the world.'¹¹⁰ However, her opinion that 'Communism's strength rests on a moral foundation' as 'Soviet Russia represents a new civilisation and a new culture with a new outlook on life'¹¹¹ was entirely in line with the argument put forward in the aforementioned *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation* a few years later, which compared the CPSU to 'the religious orders established in past ages in connection with Buddhism, Christianity and other world religions.'¹¹² The Webbs were very impressed with the way the Communist Party was trying to re-shape society from above, regarding its functions as church-like.

In spite of Labour's history of placing freedom as an important issue in the struggle for socialism, Beatrice was undaunted by the repression she witnessed in the USSR, disregarding criticism of this practice as little more than the West failing to understand a new way of life.

Owing to the initial backwardness, some features of Soviet Russia will be, and remain, impulsive to more developed races. For instance, its crude metaphysic and its fanatical repression of heresy; not to mention the sudden disappearances of unwanted persons, seem to the Western world to belong to the barbarous Middle Ages.¹¹³

She explained that Communists with whom she spoke defended the repressive measures as a 'necessary "war measure" to ensure national unity in the presence of a powerful enemy at home and abroad.'¹¹⁴ She said that in their 'casual contact with

¹¹⁰ *New Clarion*, 8 October, 1932

¹¹¹ *Ibid*

¹¹² S. Webb, B. Webb, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation*, p.413

¹¹³ *The New Clarion*, 8 October, 1932

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*

representatives of the Communist Party, the repression of free thought and free expression, in all that concerns the structure of human society, was obvious'.¹¹⁵

Ironically, the Webbs' understanding of the Soviet system was not as prescient as their old journal, the *New Statesman*, as Beatrice thought it was more likely that the 'occasional physical terrorism; the trapdoor disappearance of unwanted personalities; [and] the ostracism and persecution of innocent but inconvenient workers'¹¹⁶ would disappear. It must be assumed that she was trying to defend the repression as a necessary interim step to the construction of socialism. After all, was this not an essential, indeed integral, part of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which demanded a period of repression and violence against the old classes? At least the Webbs were open about this aspect of the regime, unlike loyal CP members who had to paint a perfect picture of Stalin's Russia.

Finally, on the two big questions that dominated this period when the USSR was discussed, Beatrice spoke positively about the Soviet economy, but not so categorically about importing Soviet methods into Britain. Asked whether the Russians had made a contribution to economic and social progress, she said:

[e]mp[ha]tically yes. I believe that Soviet Russia – if she can civilise her somewhat barbaric peasants – has solved the economic problem by organising production exclusively from the standpoint of consumption, by the whole people, of the goods and the services produced by all the workers by hand and brain. That is why the Soviet Union has no unemployment.¹¹⁷

Representing perhaps the best example that the Webbs, as with others on the USSR-supporting British left, were good fellow travellers in the Trotskyist sense of the term, is the interviewer's closing remark. Ernest Davies noted that, at the end of the interview on Russia, 'the conversation turned to home affairs, upon which subject I

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ Ibid

found the Webbs' opinions running along less revolutionary lines'¹¹⁸ which, perhaps, implies that they shared the majority Labour Party view that Communism was fine in Russia but not so welcome in Britain.

It is worth reflecting on this point. By referring to the 'backwardness' of Russia, and by rejecting such methods for Britain, she is clearly highlighting the importance of "national character" – a trait that Marxists play down in importance when compared with class-consciousness. In the Webbs' opinion, the Russians retained elements of backwardness and this was incompatible with the Fabian understanding of socialism. Not because this philosophy was particularly internationalist (it was not), but rather because of British conditions, and the history of how the British labour movement developed (slowly and over time due to the nature of the "spontaneous" industrial revolution, as opposed to the "forced" industrialisation of Russia). The British working class had been allowed time to unite and lose their 'backwardness' and this idea that Russians were not quite as advanced as British workers helped shape Labour's thinking on the subject, especially when the question turned to what the party could learn from the USSR. It is clear that Labour was willing to look at economic developments that included a 'collectivist' element, but there was obviously nothing that the Soviets could teach Labourites about democracy.

The reasons given to explain the Webbs' acceptance of Stalinism also go some way to account for more moderate Labourites suggesting that the Soviet Union may hold some answers. The general climate in the party after 1931 saw many people reject not only MacDonald the man, but also his belief that socialism could come out of the success of capitalism. In this respect, it is hardly surprising that another type of socialism was briefly held up as a model.

¹¹⁸ Ibid

This model was given credence by the reports of George Bernard Shaw and the Webbs, but not really in terms of actually influencing specific party policy. It is far more likely that the fact that these old Fabians, whose politics did so much to shape the outlook of the Labour Party, helped to further interest in the Soviet Union because of who they were rather than what they said. This, coupled with the time period in which they were writing, explains why Beatrice's acceptance of violence and repression, which went against the core beliefs of the British Labour Party, did little to turn party members away from the USSR. As with the first visits in 1920 and the TUC delegation, these reports need to be understood as products of the circumstances that were evident at the time. Of course, they also represent a great shift away from the traditional gradualist approach that the Fabians favoured for so many years, but at the same time they were able to see Fabian elitism at work in the Stalinist dictatorship.

3.5 The NFRB – organised Fabians in the USSR

While the prestige of Bernard Shaw and the Webbs was probably enough to ensure that their opinions were accepted with more than just a passing interest, the visit to the Soviet Union made by the New Fabian Research Bureau was important for the information it gave to the party thinkers – both those who went and those who stayed at home. The NFRB undertook research 'for the development of a constructive Socialist programme'.¹¹⁹ Such research had to include a study of the 'working model' of Soviet socialism.

In the introduction to *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*, G. D. H. Cole and Clement Attlee, state that the authors 'went out for a definite purpose, knowing within fairly narrow limits what questions [they were] setting out to answer'.¹²⁰ They 'were

¹¹⁹ G. D. H. Cole, *History of the Labour Party*, p.282

¹²⁰ New Fabian Research Bureau, *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*, London, 1933, p. 7

particularly on the look out for such features of the Soviet system as seemed likely to be of special interest and importance to Socialists in Great Britain'.¹²¹ They make the point of noting that 'these essays [especially] throw...fresh light on the working of the financial system of the Soviet Union'.¹²² Authors were to be responsible for their own ideas as the aim of the study tour was 'not to formulate any collective attitude or policy towards the great Russian experiment.'¹²³

It is not the object of this book to present any agreed collective statement of conclusions, but rather a series of independent pictures drawn by experts in different fields of social and kindred studies, the authors having no more than this in common – that they went out under the auspices of a Socialist organisation, the New Fabian Research Bureau...¹²⁴

The fact that '[e]ach author is of course solely responsible for the material embodied in his essay and for the conclusions which he has drawn from it'¹²⁵ meant that the conclusions could fluctuate between moderate and extreme support for what was found. This allowed Williams to note that '...the excessive claims of the few were buried among the modesties of the most important contributors.'¹²⁶

Those representing the NFRB in the USSR included Hugh Dalton, D. N. Pritt K C, Margaret Cole and F. W. Pethick-Lawrence and each member of the delegation looked at specific areas of the Soviet system, writing a chapter for *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*. Dalton, Pethick-Lawrence, T. G. N. Haldane and G. R. Mitchison looked at various aspects of the Soviet economy. Their opinions, and those of H. L. Beales who studied 'The Political System', are discussed in detail elsewhere. Pritt assessed 'The Russian Legal System' and Cole looked at 'Women and Children'.

¹²¹ Ibid, p.8

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Ibid, p.10

¹²⁴ Ibid, p.8

¹²⁵ Ibid, pp7-8

¹²⁶ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.170

Some delegates such as Dalton also commented on aspects other than their chosen subject. He waxed lyrical about working men's clubs in Soviet Russia, noting that '[t]he Russians, even then, were leaving the capitalist West behind in their provision of new parks, athletic stadiums, clubs, libraries, theatres and workers' holiday centres.'¹²⁷ To Dalton, most Russians looked better fed than unemployed miners back home. 'People here, I was told, were "paying a tremendous price for rapid industrialisation."' But in Durham they were paying a tremendous price for nothing at all – except unemployment.'¹²⁸ In other words, Dalton believed that it was better to pay a high price and get *something* as opposed to paying a high price and get *nothing*. As is shown elsewhere, relating their findings back to British conditions was a constant theme of *Twelve Studies*.

Dalton went so far as to say that '[w]e knew that in Soviet Russia there was no political freedom. But there never had been under the Russian Tsars. And, perhaps, some of us thought, we had overvalued this in the West, relatively, to other freedoms.'¹²⁹ He returned from the Soviet Union 'convinced that here was a most formidable people, whether as friend or foe in war, or as near neighbour in peace.'¹³⁰

D. N. Pritt was already known to be a fellow traveller, although according to Williams, he was '...more measured in his blindness'¹³¹ than H. L. Beales, another fellow traveller in the party. Pritt shared at least one thing with Dalton, despite the distance between their respective socialism's, in that both found the Russian spirit was alive. While Dalton was claiming that 'the future belongs to these people'¹³² Pritt wrote that he did not expect to find people in Russia living in comfort.

¹²⁷ H. Dalton, *The Fateful Years Memoirs 1931-1945*, London, 1957, p.28

¹²⁸ Ibid, p.29

¹²⁹ Ibid, p.28

¹³⁰ Ibid, p.30

¹³¹ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.170

¹³² Dalton, *Fateful Years*, pp.29-30

I expected to find them with few material possessions, able to buy in their shops little more than bare necessities, but working hard to build up their country. I found pretty well what I had expected, but I found also – to an even greater extent than I had expected – a wealth of spirit and hope, and a great deal of progress already achieved. All sorts of minor things were being done inefficiently, but every major thing was done well.¹³³

He returned to Britain believing that Russia had socialism, but Britain could have it better. This was ‘something that we ought to build for ourselves, in our own way; we could do it better and more easily, with our material wealth, our industrial basis and our great numbers of skilled workers.’¹³⁴ Although this was accepted in some quarters – that should Britain choose this path, then her industrial history and strength would allow her to enter the race for socialism a little later – Pritt’s argument was largely defunct after the Show Trials began to eliminate Stalin’s old Bolshevik comrades. In the mid-1930s Labourites grew more and more aware that Stalinism and justice were not compatible. Yet Pritt continued to defend it to the last, thus exposing himself as a die-hard Stalinist. Williams said that he particularly suffered from the epithet of ‘fellow traveller’. Despite the truth becoming known about the purges, ‘Pritt kept steadfastly to his beliefs about the system until long after it was obvious that he was wrong.’¹³⁵

Margaret Cole’s visit took her to Leningrad, Moscow and Ukraine, and throughout her essay on women and children she makes a number of comparisons with England. Her first observation was that ‘the Russian woman, *as a general rule*, works, and has always worked, alongside the man, and on an equality with him.’ She continued to say that ‘the USSR looks upon women as citizens and workers as well as mothers’¹³⁶ and noted that ‘the large pool of practically unemployed or under-employed women which exists in England, particularly in the middle and upper classes, does not exist in

¹³³ D. N. Pritt, *From Left to Right*, London, 1965, p.37

¹³⁴ Ibid, pp.38-39

¹³⁵ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.179

¹³⁶ M. Cole, ‘Women and Children’, *Twelve Studies*, p.180

Russia.’¹³⁷ Cole was clearly trying to assess the egalitarian side of Soviet Communism, to see how favourable the Russian system was when compared with English capitalism and the English class system. She ‘found women...holding high, if not the highest, offices in all manner of institutions; and people did not seem particularly interested, as English people would be, in whether there were more women in this or that concern, and if so, how many.’¹³⁸

Cole looked at a more specific aspect of the *zhenskiy vopros* (the woman question) – abortion. While acknowledging that, unlike in Britain, abortion was legal in the Soviet Union, she noted that if there was no medical reason why a woman should not want the child ‘she is strongly urged’ to continue with the pregnancy. ‘The Soviet Union wants an increasing population’.¹³⁹ But the last word ‘rests with the woman; if she won’t have her child, she won’t, and that is the end. But it would take a strong-minded woman to stand up to the battery of propaganda and persuasion that is brought to bear.’¹⁴⁰ A comparison between the Soviet Union and western countries is drawn. With ‘abortion being legal and recognised, all need for secrecy and its evil consequences has disappeared.’¹⁴¹ Cole does not offer an opinion on whether she was in favour of legal abortions, but the implication is that it at least removed some of the dangers for women who did favour them.

Cole also added some general notes on Soviet healthcare, particularly hospitals.

They vary very much. The hospital in Moscow, for example, could give points to most English hospitals in equipment, design and management. It has many of the newest devices, and all in working order; it has a very high standard of surgical cleanliness; and in some of its arrangements, such as the “wards,” none of which contain more than two patients, it compares very favourably with

¹³⁷ Ibid, p.181

¹³⁸ Ibid, p.182

¹³⁹ Ibid, p.183

¹⁴⁰ Ibid

¹⁴¹ Ibid

London nursing homes which charge twelve guineas a week to their inmates.¹⁴²

She does, however, note that 'this hospital can only be used by Government officials and those in the high ranks of the Communist Party'¹⁴³ although no Russian to whom she spoke felt

the slightest resentment about this. They accepted that the life of a high Government official was of such importance that, if he fell ill, the best resources of the State must be devoted to restoring him to health. This may be the "Thermidor," to use Trotsky's phrase; but if so many of the Jacobins support it. Our Moscow guide, himself a passionate and occasionally boring Communist sympathiser, regarded the Kremlin Hospital, to which he could not possibly have been admitted, as a triumphant advertisement of the Soviet regime.¹⁴⁴

Cole pointed out that the Metchnikov Hospital in Leningrad was more typical.

Here medical purists might be shocked by the absence of uniform and by the way in which persons – including patients – wander in and out of wards, including even the operating theatres. Probably the standard of sterilisation is lower than that of the best English hospitals. On the other hand, there are points on which English hospitals might do well to take a lesson from the Metchnikov'.¹⁴⁵

These points include the use of a private room for one or two days after an operation 'which is surely most desirable' also a garden with fruit, vegetables and flowers – 'upon which neurotic patients are put to work for short periods, and which supplies flowers to the wards and the private rooms.'¹⁴⁶ She continued to say, however, that she did not have a chance to visit any district hospitals, but the information she received from some people led her to understand that 'in cleanliness and privacy some of them might come as a shock to persons brought up on Western standards.' She concludes though, 'any sort of hospital may well be better than none.'¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² Ibid, p.187

¹⁴³ Ibid, p188

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Ibid

Cole's other main topic was how children fared in the USSR. She said that while Russia 'is at present a poor country' it 'is not, where it can help it, saving on the children'.¹⁴⁸ She says that it tries to ensure that once the 'vital needs of the adult workers have been supplied, the next call upon resources shall be to provide for the citizens of the future.'¹⁴⁹

The contrast, to any historian, between this attitude and the attitude of England during the first half of the nineteenth century, when the situation with regard to capital supply was somewhat similar, is most suggestive. So, on a smaller scale, is the fact that, at the moment when we are, as a nation, proceeding to cut down secondary education, the USSR is embarking upon an effort designed to extend the beyond-kindergarten period of school life to ten years, i.e. from seven to seventeen.¹⁵⁰

The comparison being made is clear. The Soviet Union was not rich, yet it still tried to ensure that its children – the future generation (presumably the ones not killed by the famine that hit certain areas of the USSR incredibly hard) – had sufficient provisions. However in Britain, the Great Depression hit the country so hard that children and adults alike suffered severe hardships to the extent that many adults, let alone children, had any hope or prospects.

After Cole described the educational system, she commented on the 'almost infinite network of extra-school organisations for children'¹⁵¹ and made the inevitable comparison between the Scout and Guide movements. But she said that the functions and importance of the 'junior Red organisations – the October Children for the little ones, the Pioneers for the middle years, and the Young Communist League for the older ones up to twenty-four...are very much wider.'¹⁵² She said that they 'are part of the organisation of government; they are the chief means of training the young

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p.181

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p.198

¹⁵² Ibid, pp198-199

generation to be good Communists'.¹⁵³ While she does not venture into a description about the purpose of the Scout movement, she does note that, while scouts had to perform "one good action a day", a

boy or girl who want[ed] to become a Pioneer ha[d] to go through probation like an applicant for the Communist Party, and...a member has to perform...specific jobs...which may be organising a holiday camp, lecturing to clubs in a kindergarten, or a whole host of other things.¹⁵⁴

She also makes it clear that not all of young communists' energies were 'confined to civic duty. There are athletics; there are clubs of all sorts, some confined to the Red organisations, some open'.¹⁵⁵

Finally, Cole turned her attention to family life, and compared the home life in both countries. She said that

[t]hree obvious facts must be mentioned: first, that the facilities for changing of partners are very much greater and simpler in Russia than in this country; second, that the enormous provision of State services, from crèche to factory kitchen, means that "domestic work," in the sense of cooking and cleaning and looking after the children, plays a substantially smaller part in the life of a Russian home than in that of an English one; and third, that family life and personal relations are regarded generally as in the last resort subordinate to the welfare of the State, and that a State struggling, as Russia is, against enormous natural and artificial odds, may tend to override personal and family claims...¹⁵⁶

She did note that Russians that she met

declared very emphatically that family life, in any real sense, was not being destroyed, though they agreed that immediately after the Revolution there had been a tendency to throw it out of the window along with other bourgeois lumber.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Ibid, p.199

¹⁵⁴ Ibid

¹⁵⁵ Ibid

¹⁵⁶ Ibid

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p.202

She realised that, while ties may be looser in the Soviet Union than in some other countries, 'as far as I could see this does not mean that family affection has in any way ceased to exist'.¹⁵⁸

Cole's conclusions question 'what lessons, if any, has [Russian life] for a Socialist society in a more advanced country?'¹⁵⁹ This immediately draws attention to the 'backwardness' of Russia's pre-Revolutionary conditions, with the implication again being that while Britain could learn something, it could no doubt do things better. Cole's view was that in design and intention the Soviet project

is wholly praiseworthy and that its results are already remarkable. It is not, as yet, anything like complete; some of it is very makeshift; and the chance of its becoming a really model system of its own kind depends upon the Soviet Union being able to draw on, and to train, enormous numbers of men and women...and to do it steadily, not in a burst of enthusiasm.¹⁶⁰

This last point reminds the reader that the delegation that visited the Soviet Union and who wrote *Twelve Studies* were reformists, they were gradualists, they were Fabians. The USSR now needed stability, not a return to the revolutionary excitement that had given birth to the regime.

Overall, Margaret Cole saw equality in the system, as it had 'succeeded in utilising the energy and ability of its women for social purposes' they were now 'on equal terms with men.'¹⁶¹ This final point was the one which 'an English Socialist State would have most to learn from the Russians.' Although of course, the crèches and schools in Britain were 'better than anything I saw in Russia.'¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, p.203

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p.204

¹⁶⁰ Ibid

¹⁶¹ Ibid

¹⁶² Ibid, p.205

On the whole, *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia* not only fitted in with the general interest in the Soviet Union in this period, it helped to define the party's attitude towards, and thoughts about, the USSR in the early 1930s. The generally positive reviews of Soviet socialism were due to two important factors. The first was the time in which the delegates were visiting the Soviet Union. Depression at home and right-wing reaction abroad meant that Labour needed to re-inject a radicalism into its policies that had gone missing under MacDonald and Snowden. Of course, the movement was not going to be converted *en masse* to communism – Soviet or otherwise. But the shift to the left that occurred after the MacDonald split that led to the formation of the National Government helped to create a climate where interest in more radical alternative routes to socialism could be considered.

The second factor was what the delegates actually saw on the visit. The fact that they went when the first Five Year Plan was being completed, and with some success, meant that Labourites were offered a vision of actually existing socialism that had apparently not been affected by the economic hardships apparent in the West. It is also unlikely that the NFRB travellers witnessed any of the effects of the devastating famine that began in 1932 and ended with such disastrous consequences, as the delegates were not in the country long enough to see the full results. Even if they had been, the tour guides would have been able to keep it from them as the

Soviet authorities tried to prevent the full picture from being known at the time...However, the basic information could not be entirely suppressed and rumours quickly circulated abroad. Journalists and writers such as Malcolm Muggeridge and Ewald Ammende wrote about a vast famine, although they were often not taken seriously, not least because their reports were vigorously denied by the Soviet authorities who went to considerable lengths to fool visitors into thinking all was well.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ C. Read, , *The Making and Breaking of the Soviet System*, Houndmills, 2001, p.96

Margaret Cole also admitted that there was little suspicion that the Soviet authorities were there for any other reason than to help the visitors. She said that they ‘knew the men of the G.P.U., the secret police, as kindly souls who came to our rescue and found us seats on crowded trains.’¹⁶⁴

The mood of the party and the findings of the visitors therefore helped shape Labour’s thought not only on the USSR but also its own political thought in this era. By the end of 1932 the Labour Party witnessed one of its most left-wing conferences in its history when delegates at Leicester committed the party to an introduction of socialist legislation – specifically nationalisation, on its return to power. Further details are given later, but it was no coincidence that this happened in this year as Labour’s thought process was most definitely driven by ‘socialism’, and a more radical one than had existed in the wider movement for some time at that.

While such radical socialist thought that was seen at Leicester did not last for long, the effects of the NFRB’s visit to the Soviet Union did, and this was due in part to such ‘heavy hitters’ as Dalton continuing their association with the ideas that they saw in the USSR. Of course, he did not fail to recognise that there were ‘grim aspects’ and that the Soviet people were ‘short of food...And many of them are still incredibly inefficient, and impractical. And the lavatories---! Far worse than anything in Spain or in pre-Fascist Italy. It became an obsession after a time...’¹⁶⁵ However, he continued to say that ‘I go North tomorrow to my unemployed constituents. In Russia at any rate everyone is working!’¹⁶⁶

And, as is seen elsewhere, it was here that Dalton arguably became a ‘convert not to Communism but to the concept of the Plan.’¹⁶⁷ Pimlott notes that he was convinced

¹⁶⁴ Cited, B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton*, London, 1985, p.210

¹⁶⁵ Cited, *ibid*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*

‘that the only solution to the economic troubles [in Britain] lay in emulating part at least of the Russian example’.¹⁶⁸ ‘It is my firm conviction’ wrote Dalton, that ‘unless we in this country also adopt the principle of economic planning on Socialist lines, we shall find no solution of our economic troubles.’¹⁶⁹ Of course, he had to make the obvious point that ‘if the Russians can do it and make much remarkable progress in so short a time how much more effectively could we in England do it!’¹⁷⁰ He remained in favour of some form of planning throughout the 1930s and this shaped Labour’s economic policies in the Attlee years.

3.6 Labour’s leaders in the USSR

Following the tradition that the individual who led the labour movement visited at least one area that had seen revolutionary change in the East, Clement Attlee made the trip in August 1936. In the year before Attlee’s visit, Walter Citrine returned to the country after ten years away. These visits were significant because they were made at a more stable time than when the NFRB made its visit. The economic problems of the early thirties had passed, although many people were still feeling the effects of the poverty of that time. But Labour had moved on from the radical left-wing policies that were so popular in 1932, and the new leadership reflected this.

While on the left, Attlee was no Jimmy Maxton, but he did act as a counterbalance to the right-wing socialism of Walter Citrine, the rightist General Secretary of the TUC and Ernest Bevin of the T&G. The visits made by Attlee and Citrine came at a time of heightened tension internationally, but the general views of these two leaders of the labour movement concerning the USSR dictated how they reported their discoveries about Stalin’s Russia.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid

¹⁶⁹ Cited, *ibid*, p.211

¹⁷⁰ Ibid

Attlee went to the Soviet Union after receiving an invitation from his friend Ivan Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador. Unlike Walter Citrine, whose month-long visit to the USSR in 1935 was his first time back in the USSR since 1925, Attlee did not record his findings in an official publication. Citrine, on his return, published his account in *I Search for Truth in Russia*.

Walter Citrine and his wife travelled from Leningrad to Moscow, and also visited Gorky, Kharkov and Baku, among other places. His report, while not wholly positive, does contain some interesting insights. Citrine was clearly aware that he did not portray the USSR in a totally agreeable light. His wife was given a bouquet of flowers on their departure from the country, he commented to Alekseyev, the President of the Leningrad Trades Council, '[a]fter all the criticism I have levelled at the USSR, I expected you to arrive with a bomb, not a bouquet.'¹⁷¹ But his book did not warrant the vitriolic response from Pat Sloan, the CPGB member, who wrote *I Search for Truth in Citrine*. Sloan complained that *I Search for Truth in Russia* 'is a detailed account of Citrine's search for the worst. If he sees a "hovel" on a hillside, he stops the car and goes to investigate it. But not once is there a record of his stopping the car because he saw a particularly attractive building.'¹⁷² Sloan concluded that 'Citrine's "Search for Truth" cannot in any way be considered worthy of its title. The true title should be this: "*I Search for Arguments to Condemn the USSR and Communism*."¹⁷³

Citrine was certainly no supporter of the USSR as a model of socialism for Britain, and strongly disliked the CPGB. However, he was not the anti-Soviet that the British communists made him out to be. He attempted to put forward a balanced report of what he found, noting that most visitors to the USSR 'swing from one extreme to another.'¹⁷⁴ Before he left Britain he noted that

¹⁷¹ W. Citrine, *I Search for Truth in Russia*, London, 1936 p.304

¹⁷² P. Sloan, *I Search for Truth in Citrine: A Reply to Sir Walter*, London, 1936, p.12

¹⁷³ Ibid, p.59

¹⁷⁴ Citrine, *I Search for Truth*, p.ix

my admiration had been excited by the titanic efforts which had been made by the Soviet Government to raise the low economic and cultural standards of their people. I had been profoundly disturbed by the curtailment of personal liberty and the complete suppression of independent political criticism. My pride in the achievements of the Soviet had been tempered by the recollection that these had been obtained in many cases at a great cost in human suffering.¹⁷⁵

Once in the USSR, Citrine looked at many aspects of the Soviet system, and offered a broad assessment in *I Search for Truth*. Travelling to Peterhof, twenty miles from Leningrad, he passed through the Kirov district of Leningrad and noted that

[s]ome of the houses in this district were wretched looking in the extreme. Many were old and decrepit wooden buildings which had not been painted for years...The shops we passed were dingy looking and the stocks of food, as I could judge from a fleeting glance at the windows and through the doorways, seemed neither extensive nor varied.¹⁷⁶

He did remark however, that '[o]ne good thing the authorities have done is to supply even these outlying villages with cheap electric light and it must be a boon to the peasants.'¹⁷⁷

On the whole, Citrine was concerned with political affairs, of how workers fared in the USSR and their relationship with the 'ruling class' that was the CPSU. While in Leningrad, he visited a shoe factory, textile works and the Kirov engineering works (formerly the famous Putilov factory). He discovered from his trips here that trade unions 'were only the puppets of the Communist Party. All the principal officials were Communists and as Stalin had said, "This was no accident". I asked how could the Trade Unionists exercise any independent criticism of the system?'¹⁷⁸ Citrine claimed that if a worker tried to do so in the factory, he would first be given a friendly

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p.vii

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p.44

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, p.45

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p.255

warning, the next time find himself up against the Communist nuclei in the factory and finally the Factory Director and that he 'would have a fairly rough time.'¹⁷⁹

When the question of political freedom arose, Citrine was told that Party members criticise and settle differences at the Party Conferences. He replied that '[y]ou settle your differences by exiling your opponents, or you remove them from their posts and put them into inferior ones.'¹⁸⁰ He then pointed out that, while he was aware of criticism of fallen leaders like Trotsky and Zinoviev, he knew of no criticism of any incumbent leaders. He asked if anyone could give him a single instance when Stalin had been criticised in the Party, to which came the reply '[n]o doubt there have been instances, but I cannot recall them.'¹⁸¹

As Citrine studied the nature of Stalin's Russia, he concluded that the dictatorship in the Soviet Union was not as bad as those that governed Germany or Italy. Stalin, he said, was 'much less of a personal dictator than either Hitler or Mussolini.'¹⁸² Like the delegates in 1920 and 1924, he recognised that the Communist Party was the most important political body in the land, and as Stalin led the CPSU, it followed that Stalin was the most important man in the country. Citrine said that Stalin's picture was to be found everywhere, that '[s]carcely a speech is made without eulogistic references to "our beloved leader, Comrade Stalin"'.¹⁸³ The Party was full of loyal communists - loyal to the cause, to the Party and to Stalin.

He criticised this loyalty however, as he believed that it led to an environment where Party comrades were encouraged to fight against comrade as they sought to implement the party line better than anyone else. He noted that everyone had to

¹⁷⁹ Ibid

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p.256

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p.257

¹⁸² Ibid, p.322

¹⁸³ Ibid, p.324

question ‘ “[w]hat is the true Leninist line? What would Stalin say?”...To argue with a Russian Communist is to argue with a gramophone record of Stalin.’¹⁸⁴

To conclude, it can be said that Citrine enjoyed his time in the USSR. He wrote at the start of his book that ‘I wish the reader could obtain half as much pleasure and instruction from reading the diary as my wife and I did from our visit.’¹⁸⁵ He recognised that there were problems with Russian Communism, such as the lack of personal freedom, freedom of movement and the liberty to criticise the country’s leaders. These however should be weighed against the improvements. He was excited by the fact that a socialist economy had been established, that private ownership had been abolished, production was for use and not for profit and that, in his opinion, unemployment in Russia had ‘ceased for all time’.¹⁸⁶ Nevertheless, he was worried by the lack of trade union rights for workers. He said that he would like to see ‘the Trade Unions stand up against the Government occasionally on behalf of the workers. At present the Unions seem to think too much about their duties to the Communist Party, and too little of their duties to the workers themselves.’¹⁸⁷

His visit to Stalin’s Russia did not change his concept of socialism. This was unlikely given that he was on the right of the movement. Citrine decided that socialism, as he understood it, had not been constructed in the USSR. He saw that the Communist Party had become a new ruling class, and told factory workers in Moscow during a discussion about the role of trade unions in the fulfilment of the Five Year Plan that the ‘brand of what you call ‘Socialism’ operated here is something which I cannot recognise as Socialism. It certainly is not Social Democracy. It is more like State Capitalism.’¹⁸⁸ He did not, however, offer an analysis of what state capitalism was, but he was sure that Russia under Stalin was not a socialist country.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, p.256

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p.x

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, p.314

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, p.308

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p.131

Clement Attlee made his trip in August 1936, and returned with a positive view of the USSR, but his opinion of what he saw were tempered by a realisation that 'in the main, we saw only that which it was intended we should see',¹⁸⁹ and this reservation must be remembered when reading Attlee's comments. He noted that Leningrad was an impressive city but it 'had a curiously dead appearance.'¹⁹⁰ Moscow however, was 'more alive' with a 'very fine' Metro system.¹⁹¹

Whilst there, he reflected upon two aspects of the Soviet Union. The first was the fact that Muscovites seemed very happy with their lives. He spent a day in the Park of Rest and Culture during a public holiday. 'I had every chance of seeing people as they were – its sum total in itself justifies the revolution.'¹⁹² He said that people were happy and well mannered, while the children 'were simply delightful', that '[f]amily parties were frequent' and that the 'Russian father is very devoted.'¹⁹³ He deeply appreciated the fact that Russians appeared to be constructing a socialist society for themselves, rather than working for the profit of capitalists. 'From my observations' he noted, 'I should judge that the ordinary citizen supports the existing rulers because he believes they are carrying out a programme which is for his good and which he himself desires...'¹⁹⁴ But he realised that some of things he saw 'were really showplaces and not in the least bit typical.'¹⁹⁵

However, he also commented on the methods used by the CPSU to maintain control. 'There is a great deal of skilful propaganda which is directed to connecting every success with the personality of Stalin and other Commissars'.¹⁹⁶ The biggest impression made upon him was the cult of Stalin whose picture was shown everywhere.

¹⁸⁹ C. Attlee, *As It Happened*, London, 1954, p. 91

¹⁹⁰ Ibid

¹⁹¹ Ibid

¹⁹² Cited in K. Harris, *Attlee*, London, 1982, p.126

¹⁹³ Cited in ibid

¹⁹⁴ Cited in ibid

¹⁹⁵ Cited in ibid

¹⁹⁶ Cited in Ibid

This was amusingly exemplified in the War Museum, where great pains had been taken to eliminate Trotsky. Our guides were anxious to explain that every success had been due to Stalin – every failure to Trotsky.¹⁹⁷

Just as Citrine's visit did not alter his understanding of socialism, Attlee's visit failed to convert him to Soviet socialism, which was to some extent the reason that the USSR encouraged foreign travellers to make the journey – to “sell” Russian communism to the rest of the world. In 1937, Attlee wrote that ‘I do not think that Britain must follow the Moscow...road.’¹⁹⁸ It is worth noting however, how enthusiastic the two returnees were about the Soviet system without fully endorsing it, and this was all the more surprising given that Labour at home was fending off a renewed call from the CPGB for unity against fascism.

This final point acts as a reminder that the context of when the visits took place was important. The first visitors saw a new hope in revolutionary Russia after the carnage and destruction of World War One. Those such as the NFRB were in the USSR at a time of great economic problems in the West, which is why the ones who shaped party thought and policy along Soviet lines the most upon their return were the economists like Hugh Dalton. Interest could be retained in the Soviet Union even in the mid-1930s, as this was a time of heightened international tension that allowed the USSR to be given yet another chance to prove its worth to the Western democracies.

So already Labour had begun to define the USSR as something more than simply a single unit or ‘communist entity’. It could be a beacon of hope or despair; it could offer ideas or act as a model for economic thought; and it was a possible ally in the possible coming war with the Fascist States. But it was also the citadel that propagated international revolution that funded the problematic CPGB. So just as visitors went to see aspects of their politics that interested them, whether that was

¹⁹⁷ Attlee, *As It Happened*, p.92

¹⁹⁸ Attlee, *Labour Party, Perspective*, p.274

trade unionism or economic planning, the Labour Party as a whole began to see the USSR as either a help or a hindrance, depending on what it needed at the time. But the shared ideology of “socialism” that allowed even the most rightist social democrat in the labour movement to find positive elements in the USSR was also important.

The visits and the subsequent information that people learned and returned with helped Labour to construct an informed policy towards the USSR, but more importantly for the development of Labour’s political thought, the visits highlight the fact that the Labour Party continued to be interested in other types of socialism and social democracy. Whilst Labour looked at many different forms of left of centre governments, none of the other forms of progressive governments provoked as much debate in the Labour press as the Soviet Union did. Only the USA under Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal came close, and that was only really seen in terms of economics. But the USSR offered a visible form of socialism that continued to attract a large number of Labourites for many years.

CHAPTER FOUR

Labour's International policy, the USSR and Fascism

For the fulfilment of its aims, both at home and abroad, the Labour Party needs Peace throughout the world.¹

Labour's actions whilst in government highlight the fact that the inclusion of the USSR in world affairs was an important element of the party's foreign policy. As the party left office in 1931, Anglo-Soviet relations were fairly healthy. The party had clearly pursued a foreign policy that emphasised stability and peace, reflecting the generally moderate approach to socialism favoured by the party leadership. This was despite the distrust that there was towards the Kremlin amongst some of the opinion formers such as Bevin and Morrison. This pro-Soviet foreign policy had much support throughout the Labour Party, for both pragmatic and ideological reasons. These are explored in this chapter, which focuses on the debates within the party concerning international policy, the USSR and the rise of the fascism in the 1930s, and it is split into three main sections.

The first section examines how both the left and right of the party thought the USSR should be utilised in foreign affairs. The left favoured an ideological role, while the right saw the inclusion of the USSR in the League of Nations as imperative to creating a stable world system where peace was ensured. Only then could progressive politics challenge reactionary forces. This section looks specifically at G. D. H. Cole's 1933 article in the *New Clarion* 'Socialism and Internationalism', *Labour's Foreign Policy*, written by Arthur Henderson in 1933, and the NFRB's *Why the USSR Joined the League*, written by Hugh Dalton in 1935. It will also assess the growth of the Unity Campaign on the far left of the labour movement. The most distinguishing characteristic about the attempted unity of the Socialist League, CPGB and ILP was the emphasis placed by figures such as Cripps on the defence of the Soviet Union,

¹ Labour Party, *Labour's Foreign Policy*, London, 1933, p.2

which later turned into a defence of liberal democracy. In other words, this was a defence of the capitalist system as it stood then, the reason being that capitalist democracy was better than Nazism.

This led to a temporary abandonment of socialist goals in some quarters of the party, as a type of “revolutionary defencism” took hold of party thought. In this the Socialist League and the CPGB shared a common goal with the Labour Party, while the ILP took a more revolutionary stance, as it favoured turning any world conflict into a class war. The ILP at this time was more influenced by the ideas of Trotsky than by Soviet Communists, which is visible in its ‘revolutionary defeatist’ approach.²

The official Labour Party, together with the other left-wing groups apart from the ILP, used the Soviet Union as a bulwark against fascism. Its presence was to be used in a real, rather than theoretical sense, even if that meant relegating socialist arguments or progressive policies for an uncertain period of time. The only real difference between the positions of the left and right-wings of the party was that the Socialist League argued for the defence of the USSR.

The second section focuses on the question of rearmament that arose after the party leadership changed in 1935. The moderate right, led by Hugh Dalton and Ernest Bevin, asserted that the aggressive nature of Hitler’s regime in Germany meant that the party should reconsider its foreign policy, and set about winning over the anti-Popular Front left of the party.

The far-left was preparing the way for its Popular Front stage, focusing on uniting all anti-fascists in the struggle against Nazism. It continued to emphasise the need to

² Revolutionary defeatism was the opposite of revolutionary defencism (a position taken in Russia to defend the democratic gains made by the February revolution). It was a Leninist position arguing that workers should side with their class rather than with their country, which would ultimately lead to the establishment of a socialist rather than a bourgeois democracy

protect the USSR, but was increasingly sidelined as the leadership of the party became ever more dominant, especially after the pacifist leadership of George Lansbury was removed. This section will also look at how the Spanish Civil War helped Labourites to gradually accept rearmament. A final concluding section will bring the discussion to a close as it looks at how Labour's interpretation of internationalism stood at the end of the decade, after it had had close contact with the USSR, which then betrayed the trust of socialists everywhere by signing the Nazi-Soviet pact.

4.1 Labour's Foreign Policy after MacDonald

Despite MacDonald parting company with Labour and the movement's subsequent shift to the left after the financial crisis in 1931, the party maintained the essence of the foreign policy pursued by the MacDonald Government in international affairs. At home and abroad Labour sought to work within the existing international system and use the existing governmental machinery to implement gradual reforms that would bring about social change. Working within such an international framework continued the process of reinterpreting internationalism that began in the party after the end of World War One when party leaders began to favour talks about exchanging ambassadors and trade agreements.

Inter-governmental relations and the protection of national sovereignty took precedence over urging general strikes and solidarity with workers in other countries. For international affairs, Labour's natural home was the Labour and Socialist International (LSI) rather than the Comintern. The Chairman's address at the party Conference in Hastings in 1933 reiterated this point, reminding delegates that the Labour Party was first and foremost a national party with affiliation to the LSI.³ When

³ Labour Party, *Report of the Thirty-Second Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, London, 1933, p.135

Labour was the party of Government it gave its full support to the development and strengthening of the League of Nations – the body that looked for governmental rather than “people’s” solutions to international problems. This was not a policy born out of any particular change in Labourist thinking, as the party’s thought had always revolved around parliamentary and ‘political’ solutions rather than ‘industrial’ ones. The League of Nations and Narkomindel were the more natural allies for the Labour Party.

Labour’s gradualist approach to social change relied upon stability, and of course stability in the international arena could only be ensured by peace between nations. And despite various attempts from left-wingers throughout the decade to try and tie Labour to the Comintern, stability and peace continued to be the two guiding principles of Labour’s foreign policy in the post-MacDonald era. This explains why the party continued its commitment to the League of Nations and later collective security between states to fight fascism.

If peace and stability were constant elements within Labour’s thought on foreign policy, so too was the presence of the Soviet Union. Labourites sought to include the USSR in its international policy for different reasons, and the Soviet Union continued to occupy an important place in the party’s overall framework for international affairs. The question of how best to utilise the USSR had been at the forefront of the party’s thought since the birth of the Soviet State, and the various answers that this question offered explained much about the various interpretations of socialism visible within the political thought of the party.

For the leadership and thinkers on the right, the USSR had a valuable role to play on the world stage as a member of the League of Nations, especially after the installation of Hitler’s regime in Germany in 1933. Maintaining world stability in the face of fascist aggression and the safeguarding of liberties provided by capitalism became

more important than pursuing a socialist agenda. Labour was concerned with ending confrontation in Europe, and this was the star that guided Labour's overall international policy in the inter-war years. The memories of World War One were sharp in the minds of Labourites. Egon Wertheimer claimed that all of Labour's policy choices – economic, social, and foreign – seemed to stem from '...an ethical postulate, the repudiation of war'.⁴

But even before that, as has been seen from the earlier assessment of *Labour and the Nation*, Labour emphasised the need to include the USSR in its foreign policy, so it was only logical that the party should continue its policy of emphasising contact with the Kremlin. The difference now was that the protagonists had changed, as power moved away from the PLP and towards what Andrew Williams called 'the Labour Party's administration sector grouped in Transport House under the same roof as the TUC and the Transport and General Worker's Union.'⁵ He notes that 'Bevin, as the leader of this union and Citrine, the General Secretary of the TUC, thus assumed new and enormous power over the party's decision-making process.'⁶

Despite the hostile rivalry that existed between Bevin and Herbert Morrison, these three, alongside Hugh Dalton, shaped the general thought of the movement more than most in this decade. They were helped by the election of the like-minded Clement Attlee to position of party leader after 1935, as this meant the important leading positions within the labour movement were occupied by moderate socialists who offered practical solutions to the new problems of the decade. The pragmatic answers offered were responsible for the quite momentous shift within the party that led it to an acceptance that rearmament, and not pacifism, was necessary to defeat Hitler.

⁴ E. Wertheimer, *Portrait of the Labour Party*, London, 1930, p.158

⁵ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.212

⁶ Ibid, p.213

Yet this rightist-bloc was in no position directly after the events of 1931 to exert any real influence, as the trade unions were 'too busy trying to shore up their crumbling membership and to resist wage cuts in large areas of industry to take a lead in party matters'⁷ while a decimated parliamentary party came under the control of the left. Dalton and Henderson lost their parliamentary seats and the latter spent much of his time in Geneva as President of the Disarmament Conference, resigning as Labour Party leader in 1932. Lansbury became chairman of the PLP, and the leadership now consisted of Lansbury and two former junior ministers, Stafford Cripps and Clement Attlee. A centre-left party leadership, as opposed to the centrist, even centre-right leadership of MacDonald, was established, and Peter Shore notes that Lansbury and the parliamentary leadership 'were well to the left of the NEC and much more in tune with the mood of the party activists.'⁸

The Labour left controlled not only the PLP, but also reacted against MacDonaldism at Conference. The 1932 Labour Party Conference in Leicester is generally accepted as the one that pushed the Labour Party leftwards. There was clearly a need for Labour to set out what it now believed in, so that its supporters knew where their party stood, and where their party was heading. Labourites such as Emanuel Shinwell said that he had recently 'found great interest and very few signs of apathy, and...considered that people would welcome a clear and advanced statement of Labour's policy of Socialism.'⁹

Kenneth Harris claims that this conference was one of the

most important in the party's history. It showed how strong was the movement to the left, and it saw the beginnings of the blueprints for a socialist state, which, elaborated throughout the thirties, became the basis of the postwar Labour government's policies.¹⁰

⁷ Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s*, p.28

⁸ P. Shore, *Leading the Left*, London, 1993, p.21

⁹ Ernest Bevin papers, MSS 126/EB/SS/1/4

¹⁰ Harris, Attlee, p.105

Harris is certainly correct in his analysis that it was important for the future Labour Government in 1945, and Attlee worked with comrades who he would choose after the war. 'We are hard at work' he said, 'on defining policy; my idea is a plan of action to be agreed on, so that when we win next time we shall know exactly what to do and how to do it...'¹¹ The discussants included Lansbury and Cripps, Cole, Laski and Dalton – the last four featured in the radical Attlee Government – and Cole wrote that the 'Policy Reports which were put forward at every Conference from 1932 onwards did serve as the foundation of the third Labour Government's legislative and administrative programme in 1945.'¹² This highlights just how important the 1930s were to the post-war Attlee Government.

Domestic affairs raised in Leicester are discussed elsewhere. However, there was the inevitable overlapping between foreign and domestic concerns where the USSR was concerned. A motion was passed against the proposed abolition of the Anglo-Russian Trade Agreement. The resolution argued that it would lead to widespread unemployment in Britain, and claimed that Soviet trading organisations had 'meticulously honoured every commercial bill bearing their endorsement'¹³. John Mills, who moved the motion, said that trade with Russia would continue to help the poorest areas of Britain, and noted that in eleven years, Russia was 'the only country that has not defaulted by a single penny.'¹⁴ The Soviet Union was as important to the post-MacDonald Labour Party as it was when MacDonald was still in charge, with Labourites continuing to see it holding the key to stable management of the economy. Such an interpretation of the uses of the USSR led even the most anti-Soviet Labourites to encourage close ties with Stalin.

¹¹ Cited in *ibid*

¹² Cole, *History, 1914*, p.279

¹³ *LPCR*, 1932 p.181

¹⁴ *Ibid*

Just prior to the conference, William Gillies at Labour's International Department wrote to Walter Citrine to suggest that the promotion of co-operation between the USSR and the League of Nations be developed. Gillies wrote that

[t]he economic life of a State must be coordinated with a view to its immediate and future development. But if world economic life is not also coordinated, unhealthy economic antagonisms may develop into political antagonisms and lead to war... The League of Nations, in all its branches, economic, financial, political, labour, is the gem of that machinery, which can prevent not only political and economic friction, but may also be the coordinating machinery of the world's economic life.¹⁵

Gillies favoured securing strength through the League of Nations, which, he accepted, had to involve the USSR, and this reflected the general feeling in the party hierarchy that stability in Europe could not be secured without involving the Kremlin.

Gillies' vision of the USSR joining world governments in the League of Nations raised an interesting question for Labour's foreign policy to consider and this was 'what was Labour's foreign policy trying to achieve?' Should the emphasis be placed upon the extension of socialist thought and social democracy, as the left argued, which would bring the Soviet Union into world affairs on an ideological level, or should the USSR be included as part of an international body trying to create a peaceful world along traditional political lines? An answer to this question can be found in an article written by G. D. H. Cole, who made a case for the former argument in the *New Clarion* in 1932. Arthur Henderson offered a more general explanation in *Labour's Foreign Policy* in 1933.

In Cole's article 'Socialism and Internationalism', he argues that it is not possible for a country to be socialist in its domestic policies and capitalist in international relations. Writing about international co-operation, he said that 'we want the Socialist

¹⁵ MRC 292 947/7

cause to triumph all the world over. It is therefore clearly our mission to co-operate closely with any country in which Socialism is in power, and to do all we can to hasten the coming of Socialism in as many countries as possible.'¹⁶ This, argued Cole, immediately pointed

to the need for a close working alliance with Russia, and to a joint use of British and Russian influence to strengthen the forces of Socialism in Europe. For, though we may not be Communists in the Russian sense, we recognise Communism as a form of Socialism, and recognise a fellowship with Russia such as we cannot feel for any capitalist country.¹⁷

Cole clearly envisaged an ideological role for the Soviet Union, as it was to be used to further the socialist cause. He held the same vision for the League of Nations, which, he argued, should be used 'as an instrument for promoting disarmament, closer economic relations, peaceful settlement of international disputes and the building up of real international public opinion'.¹⁸ However, Cole raised a point that was to become one of the left's main fears throughout the decade – that the League could be used to attack socialist countries, most noticeably the Soviet Union. He said that

we have also to prevent the League from being used as an international capitalist instrument for the preservation of the *status quo* in capitalist countries, and above all as a means of uniting the capitalist world against Russia or Socialism. We should remain members of the League; but our allegiance to world Socialism must always come first.¹⁹

However, not all members of the moderate Labour left agreed that the League should have such a prominent role. H. N. Brailsford took Cole's argument one step further, suggesting that Labour should focus on the inclusion of the USSR. He said that the party had to

¹⁶ *New Clarion*, 6 August 1932

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ *Ibid*

work for the acceptance and triumph of the principles on which alone a genuine League can be based. In that effort our only natural and convinced ally is outside the League. For my own part, I should argue that Anglo-Russian collaboration, rather than faith in the League, must be the foundation of the Labour Party's foreign policy.'²⁰

While Cole's eloquent arguments did not go so far as to suggest working outside of the League of Nations, his position was the opposite of those offered by Arthur Henderson in the party pamphlet *Labour's Foreign Policy* in 1933. For Henderson, articulating the general view of the moderates in the movement's leadership, one of the most important elements of the party's international policy was to ensure stability and peace in the world, as opposed to Cole's calls for the promotion of socialism throughout the world. The Soviet Union and socialism were not an integral part of Henderson's plans. He wrote that

at no stage has the Party made its adhesion to this policy [of promoting a stable peace through permanent political institutions] dependent upon a universal or a general change in the existing social order. It has never held that the attempt to secure international co-operation must await the triumph of Socialism throughout the world. On the contrary, it has held that whatever kind of governments might exist in different countries, it was none the less the duty of the Labour Movement to work with all its power "to develop the beginnings of peace."²¹

This sent a message to the left socialists in the movement who favoured either Cole's pro-socialist foreign policy, or the more aggressive interpretation offered by the Comintern. This message was that the aims of Labour's international policy were to work through the League to create a stable and peaceful world, as is shown by the quote opening this chapter. It also showed that the party's gradualist internationalist philosophy had not changed, despite the 'grave international situation' that included a

²⁰ *New Clarion*, September 23 1933

²¹ Labour Party, *Labour's Foreign Policy*, p.4

‘menacing situation in Germany and the whole of Central Europe...the increasing talk of war in Europe and the unwillingness of the heavily armed states to come to serious grips with the disarmament problem.’²²

Labour's Foreign Policy explains that the League had been successful in achieving its wider aims of putting in place the foundations of a more stable world, and therefore it is right that Labour's foreign policy continues to be largely that of the League of Nations. The party had, after all, followed such a policy since 1919, never wavering ‘in its loyalty to the League of Nations, of compulsory arbitration of international disputes, of disarmament, of international co-operation, and of “pooled security” by mutual guarantees against aggression’.²³ It follows then, that it was the duty of the labour movement to work with all its power ‘to develop the beginnings of peace’,²⁴ and that this could only happen when the party was returned to Government. The policy of supporting the League worked well while the party was in power, but the League's progress had stopped since 1931, and this was ‘a failure of the more important Governments to use the machinery which the League has provided.’²⁵

To support this argument, Henderson refers to the League of Nations Disarmament Conference that opened in Geneva in February 1932. Andrew Williams notes that the ‘remainder of the Labour Party old guard in the form of Arthur Henderson had made a complete commitment to seeing the success of these talks.’²⁶ However, there were no significant steps towards world peace taken in Geneva, and Henderson claimed that the increasing talk of war in Europe was not helped by ‘the long-drawn out deliberations’ at the conference ‘where the heavily armed Governments have shown a hitherto invincible reluctance to agree that their armaments shall be reduced.’²⁷

²² Ibid, p.1

²³ Ibid p.3

²⁴ Ibid, p.4

²⁵ Ibid, p.11

²⁶ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.218

²⁷ Labour Party, *Labour's Foreign Policy*, p.9

Persuading other governments to accept that collective interests were more important than individual ones proved a harder task than perhaps Henderson realised. Yet despite his obvious disappointment at the failure to achieve anything tangible from Geneva, he still rejected the suggestion that Labour should radically alter its policy. The alternative to making the League a success was a return to 'splendid isolation',²⁸ and this was something an internationalist party could not consider.

Henderson was still convinced that Labour's principles 'hold good' and that, for the Labour Party 'it is still true that the only hope of maintaining peace in the world is through a system of pooled security and co-operation such as the League was intended to create.'²⁹ He suggested that even if the League was to be destroyed, the party 'would still be bound to follow the same policy. Finding itself back where it was in 1918, it would not try to find something different or new'.³⁰

As for the situation with the Soviet Union, Henderson acknowledged that organised labour had recognised the 'value of friendly relations with Russia', noting that the last Labour Government 'built up such relations. The next Government will do the same.'³¹ He advocated furthering those friendly relations, both commercial and political, with Russia, and proposed a 'further treaty of non-aggression and conciliation between the two countries' and said that a Labour Government would 'do its utmost to encourage the active participation of Russia in the task of organising world peace.'³²

Henderson found support for all of these ideas within the ranks of the party. The issue of trade with the Soviet Union was raised in the Chairman's address at the party

²⁸ Ibid, p.11

²⁹ Ibid, p.16

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid, p.26

³² Ibid

Conference in October 1933. Joseph Compton said that the Labour Party wanted fair treatment for Russia in dealings with Britain over trade. It was nothing short of criminal, he said, that the British Government was neglecting

this immense market because of political prejudice. We have never urged preferential treatment for British-Russian trade, but we have protested against, and shall continue to oppose, any proposal or attempt to discriminate against our import and export trade with the Soviet Union.³³

Henderson's hopes that the USSR could play an important role in the promotion of peace were in some ways fulfilled a year after writing *Labour's Foreign Policy*, as the Soviet Union joined the League of Nations, much to the delight of Hugh Dalton, and Litvinov urged closer ties with the west to further the cause of collective security.

Henderson's abiding faith in the promise of the League of Nations seemed not to be shaken by the advent of Hitler winning power in Germany, and the dangers that that brought with it. This was despite stories in the Labour press, most noticeably the *Daily Herald*, about the fate of German religious and political groups. The party was well aware of what this meant for socialists and the left in general. A common theme in the *Daily Herald* throughout March was the rising threat of Nazism and the violent anti-Semitic nature of the new government in Germany.

The paper foresaw problems for Marxists, socialists, Jews and foreigners. It called the methods of Nazism barbaric, the regime 'completely reactionary', and said that its first objective 'will be a ruthless persecution of the Labour and democratic organisations.'³⁴ The newspaper continued with its warnings against Hitler's regime, and there is no way that British socialists could have not known what was happening in Germany. Stories such as Hitler's 'silent pogrom against the Jews' on 27 March

³³ *LPCR*, 1933, p.135

³⁴ *Daily Herald*, 7 March 1933

was followed up the next day with 'Free Hand Against Jews – Hitler Sanctions Persecution'. On 31 March the headline was 'Hitlerites burn Jewish Captive's Feet'.

Such evidence of the dangers from Hitler's regime means that it was all the more surprising for *Labour's Foreign Policy* to simply advocate a continuation of the policies that allowed the situation to arise in the first place. After all, the League was not able to prevent the economic crisis in 1929 that led to the circumstances which allowed Hitler to become a serious political force in Germany. There were of course other factors to take into consideration when discussing Hitler's rise to power (not least Stalin's refusal to allow a popular front of socialists and communists). But to argue in favour of a continuation of this action now seems as naïve as Henderson's suggestion that when the party next forms a government, it should 'pass a Peace Act through Parliament.'³⁵

The difference in the attitudes of Cole and Henderson highlight the general split over the aims of the Labour Party in its foreign affairs, and thus also the political thought of the party. The debates within the party were clearly based upon traditional differences between ideology and pragmatism, particularly when discussing how the Soviet Union should be utilised. For Cole, Stalin's Russia was to be an integral part of a progressive-leftist bloc that would extend socialism across borders. Ideology was still at the forefront of the left's approach to politics. The obvious difference in Henderson's assessment was the assertion that the Labour Party had never argued that 'international co-operation must await the triumph of Socialism throughout the world.'³⁶ Socialism for the more pragmatic right of the party was a long-term goal, not a means to an end, and this, of course, mirrored the general differences in thought about the ways in which change within society should be brought about. Labour's

³⁵ Labour Party, *Labour's Foreign Policy*, p.20

³⁶ Ibid, p.4

foreign policy still had room for an ideological dimension before taking steps towards accepting rearmament began in 1935 at the party conference.

However, prior to this conference, there was one event that brought hope to the moderates on both the Labour right and left. The Soviet Union's decision to become a member of the League of Nations in 1934 gave a huge boost to those who saw the inclusion of the USSR in the League as an important move towards strengthening, as Cole put it, the 'forces of Socialism in Europe.' The leadership in Transport House also welcomed the move from the Kremlin, as this not only represented a victory of the "moderates" (supporters of Socialism in One Country) over the "extremists" (international revolutionaries) in the Kremlin, but it was also a vindication of the long-standing party policy of bringing the Soviet Union into international affairs. This should not have come as a total surprise to the party, as a year earlier Gillies wrote that the Soviet Government had used League of Nations conferences 'to great advantage in developing its admirable policy of securing recognition and non-aggression pacts from the possible number of nations.'³⁷

Hugh Dalton welcomed this development. He wrote in *Why the USSR Joined the League* – a New Fabian Research Bureau pamphlet (1935) - that the Soviet Union's decision was 'a historic event. No friend of peace, least of all if he be a socialist, can have heard this news without a thrill of joy and hope.'³⁸ He believed that this was a 'timely reinforcement to the Collective Peace system'³⁹ and that the next Labour Government 'will seek a still closer Anglo-Soviet co-operation. The British and Soviet peoples can, if they choose, be two of the leading partners in a great international association.'⁴⁰

³⁷ The Labour Party, *The Communist Solar System: The Communist International*, London, 1933, p.13

³⁸ New Fabian Research Bureau, *Why the USSR Joined the League*, London, 1935, p.3

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

Dalton's pamphlet on the USSR and the League was more than just extending a welcome to Litvinov and his comrades in Narkomindel. Dalton also assessed the history of Soviet foreign policy in such a way that he greeted the official Soviet department concerned with foreign affairs on the one hand, while criticising the more extreme Comintern and its 'social fascist' policy. He noted that the 'blind intransigence of the Communist Party was reflected in the short-sighted opportunism of Soviet foreign policy.'⁴¹ This, he said, was because the communists made 'no distinction between Social Democrats, Liberals, Conservatives and Fascists' as 'the Soviet Government made none between democracies and dictatorships, militarist governments and those loyal to the League.'⁴²

The NFRB now felt, however, that the USSR had realised that the League was the only way to maintain peace. By 1934, 'the Soviet Government had moved a long way toward the League, and had done so because it was coming to the conclusion that it must use the League to the utmost in order to avert the pressing danger of war.'⁴³ Indeed, according to Teddy Uldricks the USSR 'presented itself publicly as the champion of collective security against aggression.'⁴⁴ This commitment to maintaining peace in Europe was apparently reinforced by Soviet membership of the League of Nations.

Litvinov made 'eloquent pleas at Geneva for joint resistance to aggression, security pacts with France and Czechoslovakia and the anti-fascist Popular Front line of the Comintern.'⁴⁵ It was, of course, these final two points that were the sticking point for the moderates in the Labour Party. The Popular Front and the Comintern caused much discomfort for the right of the party, viewing the latter, together with the CPGB, as

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid, p.19

⁴⁴ T. Uldricks, 'Soviet Security Policy in the 1930s' in G. Gorodetsky (ed.) *Soviet Foreign Policy 1917-1991 A Retrospective*, London, 1994 p.65

⁴⁵ Ibid

‘an exotic plant with no real roots in the soil...dependent on artificial fertilizers (sic) and liable to wilt rapidly if left to its own resources.’⁴⁶ Such feelings demonstrate why party leaders such as Bevin and Dalton were happier to have the Soviet Union on side within the League of Nations, which favoured much more orthodox methods of changing the world compared with the Comintern.

However, the Foreign Office ‘was unenthusiastic about Soviet entry into the League of Nations, although the French Foreign Minister, Louis Barthou, lobbied for it, to reinforce the Franco-Soviet- rapprochement.’⁴⁷ John F. Naylor notes that Barthou ‘attempted to strengthen French ties with Eastern countries; he was an advocate of an ‘Eastern Locarno’, including Russia, to restrict German ambitions there as well as in the west.’⁴⁸ The Labour Party was more in touch with the French government than it was with its own.

The USSR joining the League offered more than simply a glimmer of hope for socialists of all shades of red as it legitimised the pragmatic position Labour had taken since the revolutionary upheaval of 1917-1921. The Chairman at the party Conference in October 1933 pleaded for fair treatment for Russia in dealings with Britain over trade (as opposed to fair treatment for Russia because of a shared ideology) and the argument that British workers would remain unemployed should Britain be denied access to such an immense market was popular amongst some Labourites.

But more importantly for Dalton and his comrades, the Soviet Union’s entry into the League meant that the collective approach to international security was strengthened. Narkomindel became the primary force for the USSR’s foreign policy, replacing the Comintern which had been a constant thorn in the side of Labour socialists who saw internationalism as meaning co-operation between governments rather than a mass

⁴⁶ NFRB, *Why the USSR Joined the League*, p.33

⁴⁷ M. Jabara Carley, ‘Anglo-Soviet Rapprochement’, p.35

⁴⁸ Naylor, *Labour’s International Policy*, p.85

mobilisation of workers cutting across international borders. The accession of the USSR into the League began a process that saw advocates of stability triumph over advocates of socialism, and not simply in the field of foreign policy. Once the right regrouped in the early part of the decade, it pursued an overall policy that sought to protect the existing capitalist system from the Nazi threat, as this was the lesser of two evils.

By the time the party held its Conference in Southport in 1934, the moderates were strong enough to reassert the policy of the 1929 Government that favoured active support for the League of Nations in its pursuit of disarmament. Conference approved this move, outlined in a National Joint Council document *War and Peace*, which agreed to oppose aggression through the League of Nations with diplomatic and economic sanctions. But more importantly, the decision was taken to also offer support for the League if it chose to use armed force as well.

This was a major challenge to the historic pacifism that was so strong in the Labour Party. George Lansbury, the figurehead of Labour's pacifists, argued against the use of arms, and favoured opening up the markets of what he called the 'have nations' – Britain, France and the USA - to the 'have nots' – Germany, Italy and Japan – to help make economic concessions. This was a particularly surprising move from Lansbury. Not because he was suggesting an economic rather than an armed solution to the increasing problems in the world, but because it would seem that he completely ignored the stories of persecution of the Nazis' enemies that littered the pages of his old newspaper, the *Daily Herald*. Such an approach set Lansbury on course for a showdown with Bevin at the next Conference.

The far left of the party also disagreed with Transport House's renewed support for the League of Nations, but for different reasons. The fellow travellers in the party, such as Stafford Cripps of the Socialist League, saw a threat of war from the capitalist

nations against the USSR. He reasoned that capitalist states would inevitably use anything in their power to continue the struggle for supremacy of the world's markets. Hugh Dalton berated Cripps for reducing everything down to a simple struggle between the workers and the exploiters. He accused Cripps of being 'unaware of nationalist passions as a factor of politics'.⁴⁹ But Cripps was supported by members of the Socialist League, and intellectuals such as Laski and Hamilton Fyfe, the former editor of the *Daily Herald*.

This problem with the League of Nations ran deeper within the party than simply the usual suspects on Labour's far left-wing. In 1933, Henderson replied to a letter in the *New Clarion*, concerning Labour and the League. The letter stated that

to make the cornerstone of our foreign policy a League of Capitalist Nations, whose antagonisms are inherent in the system and are constantly being exposed, and then hastily covered with bouquets of meaningless oratory at Geneva, is surely to invite in the long run disillusionment and disaster.⁵⁰

Arthur Henderson acknowledged that this view was held by many in the party, but took heart that the socialist governments in the world were members of the League, and that the Soviet Union, whilst not a member had been

almost continually represented at Geneva in the last two years, and is showing to an increasing degree that it values the opportunity afforded by the meetings and machinery of the League to transact business with the Governments of the world and to take part in common endeavours to promote peace.⁵¹

Labour's position remained unchanged. The victory of socialism and peace would come through the ballot box rather than through anti-capitalist protest and workers' action. Henderson viewed the League of Nations as similar to the British Parliament, as an 'indispensable political instrument, to be used and developed by the next Labour

⁴⁹ Dalton, *Fateful Years*, p.41

⁵⁰ *New Clarion*, 9 December 1933

⁵¹ *Ibid*

Government in making peace secure.’⁵² He urged the next Labour Government to conclude a commercial treaty with Russia, and also a non-aggression and conciliation treaty. Labour should also ‘do all in our power to bring Russia into close and friendly co-operation with us in the councils of the nations.’⁵³

Stafford Cripps on the other hand sought to ensure against any threat to ‘the workers’ and entered into a united front with the CPGB and ILP, whose foreign interest revolved around fighting fascism and protecting the Soviet Union from the capitalist states. This was a logical extension of the arguments put forward by the moderate left of the party, from individuals like Cole who favoured including the Soviet Union because of its ideology. For the fellow travellers on the far left of the Labour Party, it was only rational to want to ensure that the citadel of socialist revolution was safe from reactionary attacks.

Cripps agreed with a letter published in the *Daily Worker* from the CPGB to the Executive Committee of the Labour Party, the TUC and the ILP that claimed that millions of workers were

eager and anxious to build up a great united front of working-class struggle in defence of the workers’ conditions in Britain, in support of the German and Austrian workers’ fight against Fascism, and against imperialist war and armed intervention directed against the Soviet Union.⁵⁴

Within a year, the National Council of the ILP, including James Maxton, Fenner Brockway, Jennie Lee and C. A. Smith, had agreed that the broadest possible united front of militant workers should be built and that the USSR had to be defended ‘by all means available.’⁵⁵ As the 1930s continued, the internationalism of the Labour left

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ *Daily Worker*, 11 March 1933

⁵⁵ *New Leader*, 12 January 1934

(with the exception of the ILP who later took a more revolutionary line) was defined by a position that demanded the defence of the USSR at all costs.

But the ILP initially joined the call for a defence of the Soviet Union and this was part of a wider question of where the loyalties of British socialists should be. In 1933 the *New Leader* stated that ‘United action to resist Fascism, War, the Capitalist offensive – *and the Break with Russia* – must be our slogan.’⁵⁶ While the general message in favour of a united front and anti-capitalism is there, the call to defend the USSR attempts to invoke the feelings from the previous decade when the Tories attacked the beleaguered Soviet system and Labourites, often unquestioningly, rallied to its defence.

Within this process of defending the USSR was a redefining of patriotism, and this took place at the same time as the Metro-Vickers trial in Moscow in 1933, the details of which are given elsewhere. But it is important to note here that Labour socialists could choose between a patriotism towards Britain, and join the party and the *Daily Herald*, and protest that the British engineers on trial in the Soviet Union were more than likely innocent, and simply caught up in a ‘war of negotiations’ between the two governments involved. Or they could choose to side with the ILP and CPGB who claimed that the men were clearly guilty of sabotage and ‘wrecking’ (the popular term in the Soviet Union in this period). Those who sided with this point of view were willing to exchange the patriotism for their country in favour of a patriotic stance for socialism. Indeed, this arguably became even stronger when the Spanish Civil War began, and Socialist Patriotism came to mean defending Spain and the USSR.

Yet this was by no means a smooth transition for the ILP. While it agreed that safeguarding the USSR ‘is necessary in order to maintain the world revolutionary movement’, Brockway criticised the IKKI for its ‘misunderstanding...of the problems

⁵⁶ *The New Leader*, 7 April 1933 (original emphasis)

of different countries, in the...analysis to countries with different conditions, and in a deliberate policy of temporarily sacrificing the revolutionary movement in one country to safeguard the USSR.’⁵⁷ The Comintern later accused Brockway of ‘anti-Soviet slanders’⁵⁸ and in 1935, Pollitt told the IKKI in Moscow that ‘Brockway used the “New Leader” as an anticommunist journal’ declaring that ‘[i]t is difficult to talk with these people.’⁵⁹

Stafford Cripps’ attempts at unity with the communists and the by now departed ILP caused problems within the wider party, as Cripps was still a member of the triumvirate that led the Parliamentary Labour Party, but it was his assertion that the League of Nations should not be trusted that caused most problems, as this was a direct challenge to official party policy. The united front argued that the League, being led by capitalist countries, could be willing to turn its weapons against the Soviet Union. Cripps and the Socialist League argued that the League of Nations could not be trusted with arms, and therefore ‘went from this point on a diametrically opposed track to the majority of the Labour Party on the subject of the League of Nations.’⁶⁰

The idea began to be floated by the Socialist League of a parallel of Nations, one made up of ‘progressive states.’⁶¹ Cripps and the defenders of the USSR in the party found themselves further sidelined after Labour moved towards abandoning its historic links to pacifism in 1935 in favour of rearmament. However, until then, with fascism on the rise in Britain, Cripps ‘believed that strong right-wing elements in the National Government would suppress any serious challenge from the trade union and

⁵⁷ *New Leader*, 7 July 1933

⁵⁸ *New Leader*, 2 March 1934

⁵⁹ RGA 495/100/987

⁶⁰ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.226

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.227

labour movements to the status quo. War and internal repression...could only be prevented by a general strike.’⁶²

In the period after the fall of the second Labour Government, Labour’s old foreign policy, with its history in ‘a set of ethical stances, directly inherited from Victorian radical liberalism’,⁶³ was challenged by the aggressive politics on the Continent. The accession to power of Hitler in Germany provoked different responses from different sections of the party. In the immediate period after MacDonald left to form the National Government, the left had the upper hand concerning internal party politics.

Moderate left-wingers such as Cole and Brailsford urged the party to adopt a more radical foreign policy that had the extension of the socialist ideology as its guiding light. The Labour Party, it was argued, should embrace the USSR in a partnership that would see socialist and social democratic values installed in the countries of the world. The League of Nations, the body Labour traditionally put its faith in, could play a part, but the emphasis was clearly ideological. Labour must pursue a socialist foreign policy with socialist goals.

The rightist leadership in Transport House, too weak to counter these arguments in the initial post-MacDonald phase of the party’s history, soon found its voice. Arthur Henderson emphasised the need for Labour to continue its policy of supporting the League of Nations in an attempt to ensure a stable world where progressive politics could further the cause of humanity. The party had to make its policy that of the League. Clement Attlee found himself in a peculiar position where he agreed with the moderates such as Henderson on the need for a strong League, but also gave support to his PLP comrade Stafford Cripps, who was under fire from Dalton and Bevin for flirting with the communists. Attlee stated in the House of Commons that ‘[y]ou have

⁶² Shore, *Leading the Left*, p.27

⁶³ S. Howe, ‘Labour and international affairs’ in Tanner, Thane and Tiratsoo *Labour’s First Century*, p.120

got to make the League a real League, and you have to put loyalty to the League above loyalty to your country.’⁶⁴ In 1937 he wrote that “National Socialism” is a contradiction in terms. A true Socialist cannot allow his sympathies to be bounded by anything so narrow as a nation, for nationalism is only egotism writ large.’⁶⁵

Attlee appeared to be successfully straddling the two moderate wings of the party. Placing loyalty to the League reaffirmed the position of Henderson and traditional party policy, but by stating that such loyalty must also come before patriotism he rekindled the fire of Labour’s internationalism. It was perhaps an attempt at a pragmatic idealism, bringing the ideas of both wings together. In this, Attlee was showing the qualities he displayed in the early years of his post-war Administration.

Perhaps the side that ought to have been the most ideological in its advocacy of a socialist foreign policy was the far-left coalition of the Socialist League, CPGB and ILP. Yet the proposed united front was born out of the realisation that fascism was a much more serious problem than was first thought, and not out of a decision to fight *for* socialism together. This was not a joint venture where the common goal was to build a society based upon an agreed interpretation of socialism. The cracks in this union began to show during the Spanish Civil War, because there was no agreement about what the members were fighting for (whereas they initially knew what they were against). As is shown below, Cripps and the CPGB began to accept that the existing system of social democracy needed to be protected while the ILP continued to argue from more of a ‘revolutionary defeatist’ position that favoured turning the coming world war into an international class war. It was no coincidence that, prior to coming to this conclusion, the ILP had been growing closer to Trotsky.

⁶⁴ Cited in Harris, *Attlee*, p.117

⁶⁵ Attlee, *Perspective*, p.157

In October 1933, the *New Leader* carried an interview with Trotsky entitled 'Can Comintern be Reformed?' Fenner Brockway noted that Trotsky's message was for the ILP to form the Fourth International 'to include all revolutionaries who accept the principles of Marx and Lenin, and know that the Second and Third Internationals are both bankrupt – the one through reactionary reformism and the other through bureaucratic centrism.'⁶⁶ Trotsky advised that the ILP 'remain independent at all costs'.⁶⁷ This was a basis for the ILP's support for the anti-Stalinist POUM in the Spanish Civil War.

The article came after a long discussion in the ILP about the correct line to take on the Comintern's new international policy. At the party conference in April, a narrow majority voted in favour of approaching the Comintern, and there was support for withdrawing from the Labour and Socialist International. The Secretariat of the Comintern sent a telegram to the General Secretary of the ILP, John Paton, 'expressing its readiness to commence negotiations' with the ILP.⁶⁸ In spite of the decision at conference, Brockway attacked the CPGB for its policy of aggression towards the ILP and implied that the CPGB was too close to Moscow.⁶⁹ However, the basis for a united front had been constructed.

Yet the Comintern was not interested in an equal united front with the ILP, as its policy was definitely based on winning over as many ILP members as possible whilst denouncing the party's leaders. The Political Commission of the Comintern was concerned that this policy should be rigorously implemented, and was worried that the CPGB made it 'easier for the ILP leaders to attack us because of our incorrect methods which turn the workers away from us.'⁷⁰ The Revolutionary Policy

⁶⁶ *New Leader*, 13 October 1933

⁶⁷ *Ibid*

⁶⁸ *New Leader*, 5 May 1933

⁶⁹ *New Leader*, 7 July 1933

⁷⁰ RGA 495/100/881

Committee of the ILP on the other hand, was seen as an improvement 'compared with the Maxtons', but the RPC was still to be 'subjected to far-reaching criticism.'⁷¹

However, in the early stages of the unity campaign, a primary concern was the defence of the Soviet Union, and it was this that the foreign policy of the united front was based upon. The coming years of heightened class struggle in Spain and the confidence that the fascists gained across Europe saw Labour's foreign policy coalesce around a new agenda, one which made a firm break with the party's pacifist past, but one which still sought to invoke the party's traditional internationalism.

4.2 The end of Labour's pacifism: rearmament and Spain

1935 was a significant year for the British labour movement. The Labour Party fought a General Election in this year against a government that successfully played the 'national unity' card. Emphasising the need for unity in a time of crisis the government returned with 429 seats, with the Conservative Party taking 387. Labour improved upon their 1931 result, but still only managed to win 154 seats. Significantly for the right, Dalton and Morrison were returned to parliament.

The party's manifesto points concerning foreign policy called for a reversal of the Government's 'suicidal' policy that had led to 'a vast and expansive rearmament programme which will only stimulate similar programmes elsewhere.'⁷² It sought a 'whole-hearted co-operation with the League of Nations and with all States outside the League which desire peace. It stands firmly for the Collective Peace System.'⁷³

However, perhaps more importantly for the party (given that there was no real chance of it winning the election) was the decision taken at the party Conference. The plight

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² I. Dale, *Labour Party General Election Manifestos, 1900-1997*, p.46

⁷³ Ibid

of Jewish Germans and socialists had been well documented in *The Daily Herald* and *The New Clarion* for some years and the inevitable question of whether such an aggressive and hostile system as Nazism could be beaten by peaceful means needed an answer. Prior to the conference, the *New Statesman* encouraged the Labour Party to accept the need for sanctions – something the pacifist element was against. The *Statesman* encouraged the Labour Party to ‘support economic sanctions with all their risks, emphasising at the same time that it would refuse to countenance a private war between Great Britain and Italy.’⁷⁴

Delegates at the 1935 party Conference took this one step further, accepting that the pacifist approach to defeating fascism had become largely untenable and delivered a vote of 2,168,000 to 102,000 in favour of the leadership’s support of the League of Nations’ proposed actions of sanctions against Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia. Dalton declared that ‘[w]e stand for the collective peace system, for strong collective action in defence of peace against any aggressor’⁷⁵ and despite George Lansbury’s impassioned plea against such a course of action, the party took the first steps to rejecting its pacifist past. This consequently led to Lansbury’s resignation as party leader. Clement Attlee won the subsequent leadership election and thus began a new era for the Labour Party. With Lansbury gone, the Labour pacifists were leaderless and dwindling. While this was not the end of pacifism in the Labour Party, the loss of the leader of the “pacifist” bloc signalled a new direction for the party. Bevin had played a major part in forcing Lansbury out and he would not stop at simply removing one pacifist to allow another in.

Clement Attlee had fought in World War One while the Labour Party had been divided over what to do. His support for some form of rearmament was practically assured, even if it was not immediate as, according to Harris, Attlee ‘reacted more

⁷⁴ *New Statesman and Society*, 31 August 1931

⁷⁵ ‘Report of the Annual Labour Party Conference (October 1935) in Bealey (ed) *Social and Political Thought*, p.144

slowly than some of his colleagues, above all Bevin, to the need to reconsider the party's foreign policy in the light of the rise of Hitler.'⁷⁶ But after a trip to Germany 'where he met 'some very tough looking Nazis'...he came to share his colleague's view of the threat to European democracy.'⁷⁷

The 1935 Labour Party Conference was clearly important for two reasons. The first was the endorsement of the League of Nations' proposed use of sanctions against Mussolini, which allowed Walter Citrine to ensure that support for the League of Nations continued. Neil Riddell notes that after the Abyssinian crisis, the labour movement 'finally began to acknowledge that force might be necessary'⁷⁸, and cites the PLP's 'grudging acceptance of rearmament in 1937'⁷⁹ as an example of this. The second reason for the importance of this conference was of course connected, and this was the removal of the pacifist Lansbury and the victory of Attlee. The Parliamentary party could work closer with the trade union leadership than it had at any other time since MacDonald left, largely because Cripps was preoccupied with building unity with the Socialist League and Dalton and Morrison were now back in the PLP. The return of Dalton was especially important as he had proved himself very knowledgeable in foreign affairs and had been working closely with the trade union leadership in Transport House.

On the left, the Socialist League and the Communists were still calling for the USSR to be defended by all means necessary. Cripps was busy declaring that capitalist countries with guns were just as dangerous as fascist ones and that they must not be allowed to turn them against the citadel of the revolution. Delegates at the League's 1935 conference agreed that as soon as a socialist government won in Britain, 'it

⁷⁶ Harris, *Attlee*, P.115

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ N. Riddell, 'Walter Citrine and the British Labour Movement, 1925-1935' in *History*, Vol.85, Number 278, (2000), p.303

⁷⁹ Ibid

would do everything possible to support the USSR.’⁸⁰ Conference agreed that things had changed for the better now that there was a ‘strong and determined Socialist state’⁸¹ present to offer more balance. Cripps said that the USSR

came to Geneva fully conscious of the limitations of a League of Nations controlled by Capitalist states, but she has recognised that even in the world as it is to-day it is possible that fear, both physical and economic, may reinforce humanitarianism and drive some Capitalist states to accept measures which may help to postpone war.⁸²

H. N. Brailsford argued in an article entitled ‘Facing the Next War’, that the Soviet Union was ‘no longer a hated autocracy, but a Socialist Republic, the one state in the world to which we owe a spiritual allegiance. Can we hesitate then, to range ourselves, with our Russian comrades, against a barbarous Fascist state...’⁸³ There was still, then, a hope from the moderate left in the Labour Party that the USSR would be utilised in an ideological way.

The ILP criticised this new approach, as it meant treading a path of conciliation with capitalists as the communists advocated a unity with anyone opposing the methods and doctrine of the far-right, despite the fact that, just a year earlier, the Comintern was criticising Fenner Brockway for wanting to ‘collaborate with all sorts of open enemies of the Comintern.’⁸⁴ In an article in *The Socialist* entitled ‘Comintern’s New Crusade’ Barbara Betts commented that the Communist Party was stretching ‘the hand of reconciliation to the Labour Movements of different countries and seeks unity only on one condition – that it shall be unity against Fascism and War.’⁸⁵ She noted that the Communist Party sought an electoral agreement with the Labour Party that, in

⁸⁰ *Socialist Leaguer*, March-April 1935

⁸¹ *Ibid*

⁸² *Ibid*

⁸³ *Ibid*

⁸⁴ *New Leader*, 2 March 1934

⁸⁵ *The Socialist*, September 1935

constituencies where communists had mass support, the party's candidate would go unchallenged.

Labour of course rejected this, and despite the rhetoric of reconciliation, Moscow was still adamant that it was 'faced with the responsibility that this bunch who control the reformist movement in this country are now the chief obstacles to any tremendous advance.'⁸⁶ Betts criticised the Comintern's support for the Soviet Union's foreign policy of a union between the USSR and capitalist governments and questioned whether 'in moulding its tactics upon the necessities of the Soviet Union's foreign policy [it] postponed the day when the workers in other countries will win through to Socialism.'⁸⁷ This shows that some Labourites who supported close ties with the USSR in the fight against fascism had come to see the Soviet Union's foreign policy in its proper light. It was no longer pursuing the successful promotion of international class struggle, but rather it was acting like other capitalist states, as it had done since Stalin adopted his policy of 'Socialism in One Country'.

As has already been noted, the thoughts of Trotsky were influencing the ILP's interpretation of world affairs, and this certainly determined how the ILP responded to the Spanish Civil War. Rather than support the Communist-backed International Brigade in the conflict, the ILP offered support to the Marxists in the POUM (Workers' Party of Marxist Unity). Tom Buchanan notes that the ILP saw Spain as a way of promoting revolution in Britain at a time when the CPGB was distancing itself from it. 'Hence, where the Communist Party saw the Civil War as validation for the Popular Front, the ILP saw it as proof of the need for the revolutionary struggle against fascism.'⁸⁸ Buchanan also claims that the ILP's support for the anti-Stalinist POUM 'marked the ILP out from the Labour Movement and the Communists.'⁸⁹ This

⁸⁶ RGA 495/100/1001

⁸⁷ *The Socialist*, September 1935

⁸⁸ T. Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War*, Cambridge, 1997, p.75

⁸⁹ *Ibid*

helped the ILP to find a role for itself in the mid-thirties, after years of dwindling numbers and strife caused by flirtation with the CPGB. The form that this role took is explained later, but it shows that the ILP still had an important contribution to make to the socialist movement as a whole despite its many problems.

Of course, the Socialist League and the CPGB followed the twists and turns of the party line from Moscow, while simultaneously trying to push for further unity in the Popular Front. The Labour Party found it more difficult to formulate a plan. This was because, as Ben Pimlott says,

[n]othing in foreign or domestic politics between the wars aroused more passion and idealism on the British Left than the Spanish conflict. 'The issues are very simple', a young poet told Julian Symonds, summing up the mood of a radical generation. 'This is a struggle between the forces of good in the world and the forces of evil.' Almost all socialists, and many Liberals, agreed.⁹⁰

The problem for Labour was clear. It was faced with the problem of trying to find a way of helping a coalition of socialists who had been democratically elected into government against a fascist opposition.

The problems came from inside the party. Firstly, how could Labour offer support without entering into a pact with communists? Especially as the advent of the Popular Front government in France under the leadership of Léon Blum, had given British left-wingers hope that the tide was turning in favour of anti-fascist action, especially after Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia and Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland. Secondly, many catholic workers had begun to join Labour in recent years, but these were also split over who to side with, as Franco claimed to be representing the Catholic church.

⁹⁰ Pimlott, *Dalton*, p.233

Labour's parliamentary tactics remained against the extra-parliamentary activities that later took rank and file socialists to fight in Spain, that Konni Zilliacus wrote to Philip Noel-Baker that non-intervention – the favoured response of party leaders like Dalton - was

merely Citrine and co's first steps to committing the Labour Movement to a United Front with the Tories in preparing for the next world war. I've known for some time that Citrine and Gillies were in the pockets of the FO [Foreign Office] and that Hugh [Dalton] was moving in the same direction.⁹¹

However, the policy of non-intervention did not fit neatly into Labour's defence of parliamentarianism – a fundamental part of Labour's political thought - as the party leaders effectively ruled out helping a democratically elected government, and a leftist one at that. This was a far cry from the days when the party rallied to the cause of the Bolsheviks, even though Lenin's party came to power through methods completely alien to the Labour Party.

The Spanish Civil War helped to bring the USSR into world affairs in a way that it had not been since the revolutionary and Civil War period and forced Labour to view the Soviet Union slightly differently. As has been noted elsewhere, Labour did not simply see the USSR as a single bloc, but rather as a pool from which to pick, choose and reject ideas to help define its own understanding of socialism, and this was both a conscious and subconscious experiment. And its actions towards the two foreign agencies of the Soviet Union of course show this. Labour's foreign policy was defined by its need for stability, which inevitably meant that it preferred dealing with Narkomindel through ambassadors and trade agreements to enduring incursions into its sphere of influence from the Comintern (which, as is discussed later, helped shape Labour's own internal policies).

⁹¹ Cited in T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement*, Cambridge, 1991, pp.40-41

Until 1934 when the USSR joined the League of Nations, it was not an 'actual presence' in world affairs, apart from the Comintern, which was largely ineffective in fulfilling its revolutionary aims. The Kremlin was too preoccupied with its own internal economic and political situation to really be involved as a world player. But it became actively involved in the Spanish conflict on two fronts. It sent arms to the Republicans – something the other anti-fascist states in Europe refused to do. And, through Communist Parties in various countries, it helped send willing fighters to join the cause. The Soviet Union, rather than simply the Comintern, was now active on the world stage.

Despite this flexing of Soviet muscles, the Labour leadership did not seem unduly worried about this, and their attitude did not radically alter. A year after the Spanish Civil War had begun, Attlee continued the party line which supported the USSR as a member of the League of Nations, praising it for taking 'a very realistic line. Instead of the attitude of indiscriminate hostility to all Capitalist Governments, it draws a distinction between those which are definitely pacific and those which are potentially dangerous.'⁹²

As for the actual conflict itself, the 'responses of the trade-union movement to fascism, rearmament and Popular Frontism suggested that there was no possibility of re-directing the bulk of the party towards the socialist internationalism favoured by many on the left.'⁹³ Herbert Morrison opposed non-intervention. He remembered that he was 'speaking for a minority within the Labour Party. As much as feeling that it was in the interests of peace to do so I felt that this was a question of principle. It was the elementary duty of all socialists to back up the legally elected Republic of Spain.'⁹⁴ Morrison claimed to be speaking on behalf of a minority in the movement,

⁹² Attlee, *Perspective*, p.222

⁹³ J. Harris, 'Labour's political and social thought' in Tanner, Thane and Tiratsoo *Labour's First Century*, p.27

⁹⁴ H. Morrison, *An Autobiography*, London, 1960, p.165

but there was much support against the leadership's perceived inactivity over Spain. John Callaghan notes that by 1937, 'when the ILP, the CPGB and the Socialist League launched the Unity Campaign, an estimated one-fifth of Labour's 90,000 members in London were involved in the pro-unity lobby.'⁹⁵

The rank and file of the party was more supportive of the idea of direct involvement in the conflict in Spain, and this saw many members of the British labour movement leave their homes and risk their lives to fight on the side of the Republicans. This was 'despite the fact that volunteering, recruiting volunteers or aiding them was illegal'.⁹⁶ Over 2,000 British men volunteered to fight on the side of the Republicans, but, despite the common interest, not all of them fought on the same side whilst there. George Orwell famously fought on the side of the POUM, the non-Stalinist militia backed by the ILP. The CPGB supported the International Brigade.⁹⁷

The battles fought in Spain between the POUM and the Brigaders were often hostile, reflecting Stalin's need to control the international movement. Yet in Britain the Popular Front was growing in spite of these differences. In 1936, the Socialist League supported the Communist Party's application for affiliation to the Labour Party and, despite the fact that delegates still rejected this proposal by a majority of three to one, it received the largest vote in favour yet. This suggests that the Soviet Union's influence in the debates about Spain was growing, and the rank and file of the Labour Party favoured aiding the Spanish cause in a way that far exceeded the official party line.

⁹⁵ Callaghan, *Socialism in Britain*, p.134

⁹⁶ Weinbren, *Generating Socialism*, p.102

⁹⁷ There are many excellent works covering the Spanish Civil War. For further reference, see Buchanan's above works; Naylor: *Labour's International Policy*, Foot: *Aneurin Bevan*. For personal views on Spain, see G. Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, London, 1989 and Weinbren, *Generating Socialism*, chapter VI

Even those traditionally less enthusiastic about the USSR began to see the value of allying themselves with the Soviet Union, while avoiding the CPGB at home.

Donoughue and Jones note that in the early 1930s, Herbert Morrison

expressed some warm feelings towards the Soviet Union, which were periodically publicised by the Beaverbrook Press to suggest that Morrison was not a patriot. He admired the original Russian revolution and had sympathy for the economic collectivism of the Soviet Union. When Russia had supported collective security through the League of Nations he had urged the National Government to collaborate, although he opposed any collaboration with the Communist Party at home.⁹⁸

There was a great amount of relief given to Spain, and arguably this common desire to help was more important than party lines.

This could be explained by the tradition of “ethical” socialism within the labour movement, and it manifested itself in a great belief amongst Labour’s followers that ‘the right thing’ should be done to aid brothers and sisters in the ‘socialist family’. In some cases, that ‘right thing’ was to collect money for the cause. Helen Cameron, a socialist from Glasgow, remembered that ‘[t]here were big rallies [for Spain] in the city hall. And it was astounding the amount of money that they could collect. I mean, people would even put in...pound notes.’⁹⁹

In other cases, it was to bring refugees from the fighting to Britain. For example, when Bilbao fell, the ILP helped a number of refugee children and maintained an ILP Home until their repatriation in June 1939. ‘Many children, whose parents had been killed, were adopted by friends or members of the Party.’¹⁰⁰ Tom Buchanan notes that the labour movement played a role ‘in the care of Basque refugee children’ and that the movement had its ‘own, very concrete, policies for supporting the Spanish

⁹⁸ Donoughue, B and Jones, G. W., *Herbert Morrison Portrait of a Politician*, London, 1973, pp. 226-227

⁹⁹ Cited in Weinbren, *Generating Socialism*, p.102

¹⁰⁰ Independent Labour Party, *The I.L.P. in War and Peace A Short account of the Party from its foundations to the present day*, London, 1940, p.36

workers, even if these differed markedly from the Popular Front.’¹⁰¹ Other ways of helping was to send non-military aid, including ambulances or to physically go to Spain and fight alongside socialists and democrats from all over Europe.

The problem for the leadership was that this unofficial activity could be perceived as siding with extremists, which, in the eyes of the leadership, was no good for Labour’s electoral chances once all of this was over. Buchanan correctly argues that the leadership saw things differently, and once again, this highlights the difference between the rank and file and their leaders. For the moderates in Transport House, Spain was not ‘an opportunity but a problem. It had the potential to undermine the structure of the labour movement and to force it off the course on which they had set it, by stimulating independent action by rank-and-file members.’¹⁰²

Buchanan also notes that the working class was never completely united over Spain, and therefore the party leaders had to take this into account.¹⁰³ However, there is little evidence to suggest that moderates like Dalton and Bevin would have reacted any differently had the labour movement been united in offering unconditional support for the Republicans in Spain. Bevin sympathised with the Republicans, but he refused to succumb to the

emotion generated by Spain...This approach mimics the language of contemporary leaders (especially Hugh Dalton) who used the term ‘emotion’ to belittle rank-and-file members who, for quite rational reasons, opposed the policy which the leaders wished to impose on them.¹⁰⁴

Jim Fyrth notes that Bevin’s ‘lack of enthusiasm...sprang not only from his lack of interest in the Spanish war, but also from his belief that the “left’s” real interest in

¹⁰¹ Buchanan, *Spanish Civil War, Labour*, p.5

¹⁰² Ibid, p.3

¹⁰³ For some years, Labour had attracted a large proportion of Catholic workers, who were split over how to react to the conflict in Catholic Spain

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p.4

Spain was as a lever for moving the British Labour Movement towards a "People's Front" policy.'¹⁰⁵

The leadership promoted non-intervention at the 1936 Conference when Greenwood's plea won the moderates a brief victory, with a resolution against sending weapons being carried by 1,836,000 to 519,000. However, the next day the Spanish fraternal delegates

were able to make such sensational revelations of the breaches of the Pact by the Fascists that the Conference changed its mind, sent Attlee and Greenwood on a mission of protest to the Government, and, on their return, carried a new resolution much more helpful to the Republican side.¹⁰⁶

This much more helpful resolution came as Attlee moved a new resolution 'demanding that Britain and France should restore to the Spanish government its right to buy arms. It was passed unanimously. Labour could no longer support non-intervention.'¹⁰⁷

Tribune, Cripps' new journal that supported the Unity Campaign in 1937, agreed. In its first edition, William Mellor wrote

[w]e must give the Republican Government of Spain its legal right to arms. We must tell the Fascist powers that the limit of their aggression has been reached. We must join with France and the Soviet Union to resist their piecemeal threat to the remaining democracies of the world. As they prepare to disarm, so shall we disarm. But as they threaten peace, so shall we defend it.¹⁰⁸

1937 was a turning point for the party. The Socialist League disbanded after being disaffiliated from the Labour Party, so that its members could stay in the official

¹⁰⁵ Cited in *ibid*, p.5

¹⁰⁶ Cole, *Socialism and Fascism*, p. 79

¹⁰⁷ Harris, *Attlee*, p.128

¹⁰⁸ E. Thomas (ed.), *Tribune 21*, London, 1958, p.18. For a detailed account of the Unity Campaign, see Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, chapter Ten

organisation and campaign for unity, although the ILP opposed this, claiming the Communist Party had pressured the Socialist League to this as it was 'interested in preserving the lobby for CPGB affiliation and not averse to the liquidation of a potential rival.'¹⁰⁹

On the question of rearmament the parliamentary party reversed its long-held position against the government's service estimates (containing rearmament expenditures). The PLP now abstained on this point

thereby demonstrating tacit approval of rearmament. This symbolic shift was consolidated later that year when both the TUC and the party conference accepted their executives' policy statement that a future Labour government would need rearmament if current international problems continued.¹¹⁰

The acceptance that arms would be needed to defeat Nazism was not inevitable. The long history of pacifism in the party would not be turned over easily. But the fact was that circumstances, and the leadership of the party, had changed. The belief that the League of Nations would succeed in bringing stability no longer seemed enough. Clem Attlee wrote that '[t]he League has suffered severely in prestige by the failure over the Abyssinian affair, and is, in fact, challenged by the Fascist States. The collective peace system is not a reality at the present time.'¹¹¹ Since the end of World War One Labour's foreign policy had revolved around the League of Nations, but this had been called into question since the Abyssinian crisis.

The second factor in explaining the move to accepting the need for force against fascism was that independent working class action had not succeeded in defeating the Nazis. While the united front of leftists and anti-fascists had helped to beat Mosley in

¹⁰⁹ Callaghan, *Socialism in Britain*, p.134

¹¹⁰ J. H. Brookshire, "Speak for England", *Act for England: Labour's Leadership and British National Security Under the Threat of War in the Late 1930s* in *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 29, (1999), p.257

¹¹¹ Attlee, *Labour Party, Perspective*, p222

Britain, the failure of Moscow to respond quickly enough to the German situation allowed Hitler to win and consolidate power. As Hitler's regime grew more confident and therefore more aggressive, the Labour Party really was left with no other choice but to accept that war was a real possibility.

This epitomised the thought process of Labour Party. This process was one of gradual change that was driven by idealism but also by a need to be practical in its reaction to events. These twin factors can be seen in the way the party dealt with the Soviet Union and in its response to the Spanish Civil War. The party's Soviet policy was clearly led by the pragmatism of MacDonald, who believed that answers to the problems of economic depression and the rise of the far right in Europe could be found in trading and negotiating with the USSR. Arthur Henderson provided the practical, stable groundwork that could have brought success had the Labour government not fallen early in its first term.

In a way, this was the right's interpretation of internationalism. The moderate party leadership did not want to withdraw from international affairs and live only within the borders of the British Empire. It wanted to play an active role in resolving any problems in Europe, as it was still driven by a vision of harmony born from its Liberal, Christian and Marxist socialism. Of course, there were many in the party who favoured closer ties with the Soviet Union *because* of, rather than *in spite* of its socialism. The USSR provided a vision of a working model of socialism that could offer hope to the desperation that plagued Britain. The need to defend the USSR at all costs advocated by some on the left of the party was Labour's original understanding of internationalism expressing itself. The country of the working class needed to be free to inspire all workers throughout the world.

The question of the correct reaction to Spain proved quite the opposite in terms of the balance of power. Whereas the numerically smaller leadership led opinion on the

Soviet question, on Spain it was the much larger rank and file who guided the movement's response and ideas. The party hierarchy could do little but advocate the practical party line of non-intervention as many rank and filers actively participated in aiding the Spanish conflict. This is not to say that the membership was on a completely different course to their leaders. Indeed, members generally agreed with the party line, and there were times during the Spanish Civil War when members and leaders were clearly in tune with one another, such as the action taken on refugees and financial collections for the cause.

But there were occasions when the rank and file would not only let party bosses know that they disagreed with them, but they would act upon these disagreements. While this did not mean that the grassroots were suddenly advocating a Soviet Britain, it does show that, at times the party was definitely to the left of the leadership, and that idealism was more important to party workers 'at the bottom' than they were to pragmatists 'at the top'. What was important though, was that the rank and file never chose to try and *formally* create a united front.

The 1936 Conference in October defeated a motion instructing the party to recognise the need for the unity of the working class movement, and to accept the affiliation of the Communist Party by 1,728,000 to 592,000.¹¹² Conference the following year enforced this vote, and again demonstrates the nature of the Labour Party, as the members and the leaders could ultimately put their differences aside to work as a united party. The long-term aim of returning a Labour Government and the non-specific socialism of Labour were ultimately the glue that held the party together.

¹¹² The Labour Party, *The Labour Party and the so-called "Unity Campaign"*, London, 1937, p.2

4.3 Conclusion: Towards War

In a twist of history, this aim of seeing Britain's mainstream progressive party return to government became more of a reality the closer the country got to war. By 1939 coalition politics was seen as a viable option amongst the parliamentary parties and Pimlott notes that '[b]y indicating their willingness to serve in such a government, but only if Chamberlain was not at the head of it, Labour leaders were able to exert a crucial pressure'.¹¹³ Of course, Citrine had been working closely with the Government for some time, thus paving the way for Labour to play a part in an administration based on a coalition if war did become fact.

Labour's foreign policy since the PLP accepted rearmament as a fact in 1937 was characterised by 'its opposition to appeasement and support for a Russian alliance as the cornerstone of an alternative foreign policy.'¹¹⁴ This of course was for purely practical reasons, as it was a matter of fact that the Soviet Union would be a useful ally in a military alliance against the fascist states. After the many debates of the decade, the official party line had returned to its traditional position that favoured the inclusion of the USSR in international affairs to create stability. Naylor notes the irony of the alliance that developed between the Labour Party and Churchill as the two 'pursued the same goal in British foreign policy: the man who had given his all to 'strangle Bolshevism in its cradle' and the party which helped frustrate that aim, now agreed that Russia and Britain must ally to thwart Hitler's purposes.'¹¹⁵

In the final months before war began, the party had reaffirmed its position as a *nation*-based rather than *class*-based socialist party, as 'the Labour movement in both words and actions became concretely engaged in strengthening Britain's national

¹¹³ Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, p.183

¹¹⁴ Hinton, *Labour and Socialism*, p.159

¹¹⁵ Naylor, *Labour's International Policy*, p.294

security.’¹¹⁶ Of course, this ‘commitment and involvement during the late 1930s paved the way for Labour’s much greater role throughout the 1940s in Churchill’s War Coalition and Attlee’s postwar Labour Government’¹¹⁷ and it would seem that this was the logical conclusion of the basic question of what Labour’s foreign policy was trying to achieve, which has been discussed here.

In the 1930s, the active involvement of the Soviet Union in Labour’s foreign policy was able to unite the party as both wings favoured an alliance of some sort with the USSR. The different strands of progressive political thought were able to unite around the idea that the USSR had an important role to play in international affairs. The right’s policy of bringing the Soviet Union in from the cold was vindicated when it joined the League of Nations in 1934. This was a practical policy for the party to pursue in the face of the many problems in the international arena. The left sought an alliance based on a shared ideology, but misread the signs from Moscow showing that ideology was not, in fact, the Kremlin’s paramount concern. Defence of the Soviet Union was an effective clarion call, and rallied British socialists to the cause of safeguarding the workers’ state, but Stalin was more concerned with establishing a patriotic defence of Russia, which culminated in the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939.

The Labour Party’s foreign policy in the 1930s demonstrated the wider process of transition that saw Labour move away from being a party with a strong ideological base (as opposed to being an ideological party) to one that was closer to being a pragmatic, progressive political party that would be guided by a loose socialist or social democratic ‘code of ethics’ when resolving problems. In the future Labour could, as it did in this decade, dilute long-held doctrines with new concepts to form something in which observers can see remnants of the old faith. But it could also jettison ‘out-dated’ notions in favour of ‘practical’ policies that were children of the

¹¹⁶ Brookshire, ‘Speak for England’, p.251

¹¹⁷ Ibid

new circumstances, such as the rejection of pacifism in favour of rearmament. After the war, as the world found itself in yet another new situation termed the 'Cold War', this process began again. Labour's pacifists called for unilateral disarmament through CND, while some Labourites took a quasi-*realpolitik* approach, favouring membership of NATO in order to 'protect' the world from the Communist threat.

The foreign policy of the moderate elements in the party in the 1930s tried to accommodate both the ideological and pragmatic strands of Labour's socialism. Cole argued that the extension of socialism across international borders should have formed the basis of the party's international policy, and that the inclusion of the Soviet Union was of the utmost importance if this ideological goal was to be fulfilled. Such an ideological approach was a reflection of the thought of the wider movement at the time, as the party needed reassurances about what its purpose was, and the left was able to offer such reassurances while the trade unions and Labourites on the right of the movement were otherwise engaged.

This does not mean that the left was ideological and the right simply practical. There was some compromise or alliance in the ideals that formed Labour's wider understanding of internationalism. Both left and right agreed that isolation was not an option, and generally accepted that the USSR should be a partner in the Collective Security campaign. And, as is shown elsewhere, they both agreed that unity with the communists was not a sensible option for Labour, despite the threat of fascism.

While Cole understood that socialist internationalism meant an extension of socialist thought and practice throughout the globe as soon as possible, it was not the same as the Trotskyism of the ILP in this period, which placed this aim above everything else. The ILP saw no difference between the victory of socialism and the defeat of fascism – the two had to go hand in hand. Cole and the left-wingers in the Labour Party did not reach the same conclusion, thus showing just how close they were in reality to the

right of the party, and that party unity and social democracy (as opposed to a more specifically *socialist* democracy) was worth holding on to. Those in the leadership did not consider the victory of socialism to be of paramount importance in the immediate future – that could come later when fascism was defeated.

Overall, with the exception of the more extreme ILP, Labour's foreign policy in the 1930s saw its internationalist traditions acclimatise to the new conditions of heightened tensions in Europe. It still sought change through gradualism, and, after time, the left of the party accepted this. But the need was also there for a clear long-term aim, which was the promise of socialism, and it was here that the USSR featured in Labour's plans. It offered hope of stability in Europe. By joining the League of Nations, the USSR confirmed that it had accepted the precedence of Narkomindel over Comintern, which meant that revolution was no longer the most important aspect of Soviet foreign policy. It also meant that the West had the largest country in the world on its side against the Nazi threat.

But it also offered a clear signal to the left of the Labour Party that socialism was firmly on the agenda, and this interpretation came from the way the left utilised the USSR. Its experience of dealing with the Soviet Union had promoted more ideological ties than were invoked in the rightist Labourist elements. It was not so much that the left and right of Labour had different foreign policies, but they perhaps had different priorities set within the boundaries of "internationalism", which had to accept the new environment that included a more aggressive Germany and Italy, but a less hostile USSR.

CHAPTER FIVE

Defining Labour: internal politics and the Soviet Union

Given that the Soviet Union was credited with many admirable achievements, was the target of fascist threats and was the only nation to help Republican Spain, even the sceptical were reluctant to condemn.¹

Labour's foreign policy was forged by conscious decisions taken by the party that envisaged a major role being played by the Soviet Union in international affairs. However, in matters closer to home the USSR gave the party no choice *but* to deal with it, forcing it to react to its ever-present and growing status in British politics in the 1930s. This was partly due to the 'credited achievements' that Mervyn Jones notes in the quote opening this chapter, as many Labour Party members saw unity with socialists as the best way to counter the threats of the 1930s.

But it was also due to the justified paranoia of the party leadership that saw communist threats from all corners of the British labour movement at a time when they were concentrating on trying to rebuild the party after 1931. The Soviet Union, through the CPGB and the Comintern, had stepped through the mirror that Labour held up to Stalin's country, and was firmly in Labour's back yard. This meant that figures such as Henderson and Dalton, who could theorise from a safe distance about the virtues of including the USSR in the party's foreign policy, were deprived of this safety as Labour defined the type of socialism it wanted to implement, and what type of party it would be. This process began after the events of 1931, when Labour was in disarray. Its vote in the General Election crashed, and only 46 MPs were returned to parliament.

Labour had three possible roads it could travel. Andrew Thorpe argues that Labour could accept that the 1931 election result could be 'written off as an aberration, a

¹ M. Jones, *Michael Foot*, London, 1994, p.55

defeat due solely to special causes which would not prevail in a future contest.’² Henderson argued that Labour should continue with the gradualism that governed party thought under MacDonald, even though the response to the crisis that faced the Labour Government was

uninspiring and represented the bankruptcy of gradualist socialism in an economic recession. Believing that socialism could only come from the *success* of capitalism, MacDonald and Snowden had no distinctive policy to deal with capitalism in crisis. The only solutions they had were orthodox ones – reducing taxation and public expenditure, and allowing industry to become more competitive by cutting its costs and, hence, wages.³

The second possibility was that Labour could retain its gradualist approach to social reform, whilst recognising that its policies needed more clarity. It needed to think about its relationship with capitalism – would it work to end it, reform it or simply attempt to manage it better than the capitalist parties?

The final possibility was the left-wing argument that the 1931 result was the inevitable result of accommodating capitalism, and this should never be allowed to happen again. Capitalism was clearly close to collapse and therefore Labour should adopt a radical programme to take full advantage of the circumstances once it returned to power.

The old MacDonaldite belief in Socialism emerging painlessly from the success of capitalism now seemed nonsensical; indeed, the march of Fascism on the Continent, and the formation of the British Union of Fascists in 1932, both seemed to suggest that an apocalyptic struggle was at hand.⁴

Initially, the party’s almost instinctive reaction was to travel the third path, and embrace the left in order to return to what it knew. But the gradualist tendencies of the party won through and the initial rejection of MacDonaldism ended. Capitalism did

² A. Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s*, Oxford, 1992, p.26

³ Ibid, p.23

⁴ Ibid, p.27

not collapse and by the mid-1930s, Labourites such as Attlee, Dalton and Morrison, together with the leading trade unionist figures of Bevin and Citrine, led a steadier ship on slightly calmer waves.

It was a quest for parliamentary power – one of the main reasons for the existence of the Labour Party – that helped to define the leaders' response to the “presence” of the USSR in British politics. And this “presence” also reinforced Labour's identity as a specifically parliamentary, rather than a revolutionary, party. It reacted against what it saw as an infiltration of the British labour movement by Communists by reasserting Labourist traditions of parliamentarianism, reformism and social democracy, as opposed to the doctrinaire interpretation of Marxism.

As Labour began to travel on the ‘second path’, the need for tighter control over party activities was evident. By adopting the approach that Labour could still implement gradual change, the leaders were reaffirming the party's social democratic beliefs, which emphasised that the way to change society was through parliament. It thoroughly rejected any extra-parliamentary activities that were advocated by the far left of the party and the CPGB. Ironically, despite all the problems Labourites had with MacDonaldism, the party returned to the words of its former leader, who years earlier had written that ‘[a] workman was not fully organised unless to his weapon of trade unionism he added to it the weapon of the ballot box.’⁵

It is this conflict between Transport House and the left of the movement that is discussed in this chapter. On the whole, the tensions in the movement revolved around the questions of whether Labour should be solely a party of the working class, or should it not only acknowledge its ‘one-nation’ traditions but actively pursue a more inclusive approach, and whether it should continue with its parliamentary and gradualist politics, or replace them with more aggressive and revolutionary tactics.

⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 26 March 1917

The parliamentary road meant that Labour had to be aware of the perceptions the electorate may have had of a party that denounced revolutionary tactics yet colluded with a revolutionary party. This desire for electoral purity was one of three reasons why Labour rejected the approaches of the CPGB to either affiliate to the Labour Party or to work with it in a united front. The second was the history of the Communist Party's entrust tactics and the openly hostile language used by communists to denounce Labour, especially as the Comintern maintained that it was continually

necessary to show the role of the Labour Party as the chief social supporter of the bourgeoisie and how it weakens and divides the working class by showing illusions regarding Democracy and enchainning it to "constitutional methods." Thus the Labour Party acts as an accomplice of Fascism and the democratic institutions are utilised in order to prepare the way for it.⁶

The final reason was that, as has been shown elsewhere, Labour simply was not a "Bolshevik" party. The aggressive nature of Soviet socialism would not fit into gradualist socialism of Labour leaders like Dalton or the labourism of trade unionists like Bevin. Put simply, there was not the desire to create a Soviet Republic of Britain. Because no such desire existed, Labour used the USSR in a much more negative way than it did when confronting the foreign and economic issues (especially the latter). Exploring what Labour was by proving what it was not helped to define Labour's internal party politics.

The chapter is split into two sections. The first section examines the leadership's response to the party's drift leftwards after 1931, and how and why it sought to stave off the Soviet influences evident in the left's arguments. It will compare the left's pursuit of the 'third path', which included a study of the Soviet political system by H. L. Beales in *Twelve Studies of Soviet Russia*, and the ILP's disaffiliation from the official Labour Party, to the leaders' response through various pamphlets, such as *The*

⁶ RGA 495/100/881, document no.7835/6

Communist Solar System and *Communist and Other Organisations*, aimed at rank and file Labourites. The official Labour Party line not only maintained the old orders from the previous decade, which stipulated that the party should have no truck with the CPGB, but it went further than before, denouncing all extremist elements in British politics as no different from one another. This sentiment was not out of step with the majority view in the party, but it failed to recognise the growing support for some form of united action against fascism.

The second section discusses some explanations as to why certain sections of the Labour Party continued to support the Soviet Union at a time when more and more disturbing stories were coming out of Stalin's Russia. It suggests that the fight against fascism and the need for a tangible "Heaven" – the USSR – were the main reasons. It assesses the reaction to the news that British workers were on trial in Moscow in 1933, how rank and file Labour Party members coalesced with communists to fight fascism in Britain and also looks at the response to the news of the Show Trials.

5.1 A post-Election shift to the left

The move leftwards by the majority of the party immediately after the end of the MacDonald era can be explained by the need to reassert what Labour believed in. There was general disappointment at the fact that it had failed to implement any socialist policies to alleviate the suffering caused by the Depression. The Labour Chancellor Philip Snowden had chosen orthodox capitalist economics that pleased the City more than it pleased his own comrades. With morale and confidence in Labour's political thought so low, it is not surprising that interest in the USSR intensified in the 1930s, especially as the overall period of this leftist revival coincided with the NFRB's visit to the Soviet Union in 1932, which brought back reports of a working system of socialism as an alternative to some of Labour's ideas.

Prior to that visit however, as has already been shown, was the passing of control of the party to the PLP. The trade union representatives were either regrouping or fending off spending cuts. And moderate Labourites were either too shocked to analyse the events of 1931, were out of parliament after the 1931 election, or both. On the whole, the left had the platform all to itself, and some on that platform used it to warn that socialism may not be possible by parliamentary methods.

Cripps began to speak of the need for a temporary dictatorship when Labour next won power and he and Laski became more committed to a broad Marxism as they attempted to offer an explanation for the events of 1931. Gradualism, it was argued, could not defeat the vested interests of financiers, and Laski claimed that

the road to power is far harder than Labour has so far been led to imagine. If it retains its faith in Socialism, it will meet a challenge that does not passively accept its right to govern in a Socialistic way...⁷

Cripps argued that Emergency powers would be needed to avoid a democratically elected Labour Government being forced from Office again by capitalists. Yet, as David Howell notes,

these changes were essentially moves within the parliamentary arena. There was no suggestion that Labour's strength might be increased by a concurrent mobilisation of industrial power. The radical critics were thus encased for the most part within Labour's parliamentary tradition. Their proposals tended to concentrate on how far such institutions could be turned to Labour's benefit, instead of acting as obstacles.⁸

Even the more militant thinkers seemed to agree. For example, Cripps and Laski still favoured working within the Labour Party, albeit through the Socialist League. This shows that they still believed in parliamentary methods, retaining the traditional faith

⁷ Cited in D. Howell, *British Social Democracy: A Study in Development and Decay*, London, 1976, p.55

⁸ Ibid, p.56

in the idea that a large majority of socialist MPs in the House of Commons could be enough to ensure that Labour had the power to introduce socialism through an Act of Parliament. Laski was still wary of shadowy financiers though, and reminded the followers of parliamentary democracy that the 'Constitution counts for nothing if property were at stake.'⁹

These were the general interpretations of the situation after 1931 that formed the basis of the 'third path'. The problem for moderate politicians such as Dalton however, was the rhetoric of these two men. They both used terms clearly implying that MacDonald surrendered 'to international finance'. Cripps said that this provided 'the clearest demonstration of the power of capitalism to overthrow a properly elected Government by extra-parliamentary means.'¹⁰

Such talk of 'overthrowing', 'extra-parliamentary' and 'surrender' did nothing to bring the left and the right together, and despite the advocacy of parliamentary tactics, Dalton could not accept that the party was being guided by Marxists. He fought against those advocating a course of action that was very un-Labour. Ben Pimlott highlights the first row between Dalton and Harold Laski.

What concerned Dalton was a paper called *A Labour Programme of Action*, drafted by Laski and William Mellor, another Socialist Leaguer. Dalton saw anti-democratic leanings in *A Labour Programme of Action*, and strongly objected to a suggestion by Laski and Mellor 'that socialists needed to arm themselves against the risk that 'capitalist' parties would prevent an electorally victorious Labour Party from taking office.'¹¹ He refused to sign the document, questioning whether

any party which had just been defeated at a General Election dare to continue in office without summoning Parliament...Would it be

⁹ Cited in I. Kramnick and B. Sheerman, *Harold Laski: A Life on the Left*, London, 1993, p.301

¹⁰ Cited in Callaghan, *Socialism in Britain*, p.120

¹¹ B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton*, London, 1985, p.207

able to collect any taxes, and would it not almost immediately bring itself into collision with the courts?¹²

However, Attlee, influenced as he was by G. D. H. Cole, disseminated the programme amongst Labour MPs. Dalton advocated that the N.E.C. should ignore it.¹³ The interesting point about this episode is not that Cripps and Laski were advocating more extremist tactics, but that they were at least reassessing the whole situation. Whether their conclusions were right or wrong is not important. The fact is that they were willing to fundamentally question not only Labour's tactics, but also the methods of the capitalist system, which, they believed, would do anything to stop a socialist party taking office.

Dalton, who was instrumental in restructuring the Labour Party's political thought in the thirties, was not. He, like his moderate party comrades, still believed that parliamentary methods and 'fair play' would win Labour power. Yet at the same time, his travelling companion on the trip to the USSR in 1932, H. L. Beales, was questioning this very aspect of British democracy. His essay in *Twelve Studies of Soviet Russia*, 'The Political System', explored the virtues of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. It opened with the statement that should have struck a chord with his comrades at the time, given that it was a period of rebuilding the Labour Party. In Britain, he wrote

we are politically complacent. So enamoured are we of our political liberties, as embodied in our parliamentary and local government institutions, that we scarcely ever examine them in a qualitative, still less quantitative, manner. We take it for granted that we are a free people, that our Parliament is the mother of a numerous progeny of similar agencies of free democratic peoples...¹⁴

¹² Cited, *ibid*

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ H. L. Beales, 'The Political System', *Twelve Studies*, p.125

Beales discussed a number of issues in his essay, ranging from 'The Soviet Constitution' and 'The Communist Party' to 'The Isolation of Russia'. It is not necessary to discuss here whether or not Beales was correct in all of his findings, but rather what is important is the message he was trying to convey to the party back home. As with the essays by some of his comrades on the trip concerning the economics of the country, Beales was certainly trying to teach the leaders and rank and file members of the Labour Party not only about the Soviet Union, but also what his party could learn from it, and what his movement should avoid. In a comment structured to remind Labourites of the events of 1931, he claimed that the ballot-box was no longer the agency of freedom, as 'it is patent that the centre of gravity of our public life is shifting away from the House of Commons to the scarcely discernible figures, be they anonymous financiers or equally anonymous Treasury officials'.¹⁵

Once Beales has informed the reader that the Soviet system is now a permanent fixture on the world's political map, as the 'immediate revolutionary past has become the stable present' 'collapse is unthinkable',¹⁶ he offers an assessment of what that system is now like. He notes that the USSR is 'a State under the dictatorship of the proletariat' and that the 'class struggle still continues and will continue for a long time to come.'¹⁷ He then referred to "liquidation" of opponents. After claiming that to be a kulak or bourgeois is to 'belong to a class that has no future', he claims that '[n]o one pretends that the process of liquidation is anything but devastating to the liquidated.'¹⁸

"Liquidation" was often overlooked in this way, mentioned either in passing or justified as a necessity that the "Russians" needed to pursue, the implication being that the British would not need to do this, as they were still more "civilised" than their Russian comrades. This must have been an unusual sight as members of a movement

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid, p.127

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid, p.128

with its foundation in the Methodist Church and large pacifist following were openly accepting the mass murder of political and economic opponents. George Bernard Shaw, quite matter-of-factly, wrote that '[i]n Russia the governing bodies are purged and the slackers "liquidated" (the word covers shooting in grave cases) pretty promptly' and then advocated such a policy for Britain stating that '[w]hat the Russians can do we can do.'¹⁹

The Webbs also followed this line, claiming that it

is hard for the Englishman of the present day to appreciate the abhorrence and hatred felt by the Russian for the kulak. To-day, in his "liquidation", he may seem only the exceptionally thrifty and energetic peasant, who had raised himself by his virtues out of the destitution of the thriftless and incapable mass. But all students of Russian rural life have, for the past half-century or more, stigmatised the kulak as a terrible oppressor of his poorer neighbours.²⁰

They accepted without question the validity of a policy that led to the statement: '[i]n those provinces in which the formation of kolkhosi [sic] had been specially pushed forward...it could be reported, at the end of 1933, that the liquidation of the kulak had been substantially completed.'²¹ The acceptance by Labourites that an answer to the problem of opposition was "liquidation" suggests either a lack of understanding of what that term meant, or a lack of understanding of what socialism meant. It is suggested that Beales falls into the former category, while the unemotional Fabians fall into the latter. But it does show that, where the Soviet Union was concerned, Labourites were at times willing to overlook, or at least explain away, the more unpleasant aspects of the system.

Beales went on to discuss the proletarian dictatorship in further detail, stating that it was 'the organised power of the industrial workers in association with the humbler

¹⁹ G. Bernard Shaw, *Everybody's Political What's What*, London, 1945, p.36

²⁰ S. & B. Webb, *Soviet Communism*, p.564

²¹ *Ibid*, p.566

peasantry.’²² In his defence of the use of a secret police force, he states that the role of the GPU was as a defender of the Revolution, necessary because of the ubiquitous sabotage of the industrialisation process, ‘which at times deranges local services and retards the development of full Communism.’²³ He continues to offer an analysis of the relationship between the CPSU and the Soviets, and notes that ultimately, ‘the real heart and will of the Russian political system is the Communist Party. Formerly the Communist Party exercised a condominium with the Soviets, but those days are over. It is now supreme.’²⁴

Beales outlines how the CPSU exercised its will. ‘It dominates the Soviets: it works through the GPU: it is supreme in the Red Army. It pulls all the strings, and the strings are gathered together in the Kremlin.’²⁵ He recognises that this may sound undemocratic, but dismisses this as

irrelevant to the Russia of to-day. The Communist Party is the unifying agent of Russian life. Be it education and the cultural revolution, or industrialisation and the economic revolution, or the defence against counter-revolution and attack from the outside, it is the Party that makes decisions and sees to their fulfilment.²⁶

From this he makes the case in favour of dictatorship over parliamentary democracy. Applauding the direct and immediate contact between the government and the governed, he says that this system is the ‘only conceivable method of government for a society that aims at classlessness.’²⁷ Such words would suggest that Beales was in agreement with the assessment of British democracy offered by his good friends Laski and Cripps, and his conclusion that this was the only way to ensure a classless society was a clear message for the party back home.

²² Beales, *Twelve Studies*, p.128

²³ *Ibid*, p.129

²⁴ *Ibid*

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.135

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.136

Beales continues this defence of the Soviet dictatorship claiming that ‘a wrong impression would be conveyed if it were suggested that the Communist Party played the tyrant in relation to the Soviets or to the public considered individually.’²⁸ Yet he quickly accepts that this was the case, albeit temporarily. On the surface, he says, it may be true that ‘in Russia the Communist Party, or the Politbureau at the head of it, plays the tyrant’s part’ but then claims that it ‘would not be true to suggest that there is a divergence of interest between the proletarian masses and Stalin and his comrades of the Politbureau who exercise power on their behalf.’²⁹ However, this simply sounds like the defence used by the Tsar’s courtiers to fend off criticism that Nicholas II was removed from his people. One Tsarist follower once wrote that the Tsar could ‘do no wrong; he stands above classes, party politics and personal rivalries. He desires the good of his people and has practically unlimited means for achieving it. He seeks nothing for himself.’³⁰

Yet in spite of Beales’ praise of Stalin’s system, and in spite of his criticism of British democracy, noticeable in this section of his essay for the disapproval he displays for ‘the doctrine of trusteeship’ which is not based on equalitarian democracy (a subtle attack upon Labour’s supporters of a corporate socialism?), Beales does not endorse the importation of Soviet ways into Britain via the Labour Party. His conclusion was a mixture of defending the Soviet Union, claiming that it was ‘more truly democratic than the parliamentary system of this and other professedly democratic countries’, and rejecting Soviet methods. He conceded that the ‘revolutionary process is indeed an unlovely process, one in the course of which people will suffer – commonly the wrong people.’³¹

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Cited in C. Read, *The Making and Breaking of the Soviet System*, p.7

³¹ Beales, *Twelve Studies*, p.143

He argued that ‘an attitude towards the present régime in Russia of hatred, or pious horror or quasi-moral superiority is not very helpful.’³² The habit of ‘mere condemnation of everything Russian’ was already out of date, but so too was the ‘pious belief that a crude transference to this country of the Russian revolutionary method would bring us to the gates of the New Jerusalem.’³³ He continued to say that [c]ontinuity counts in politics, and therefore England should not go ‘a-whoring after strange Russian gods.’³⁴

The message that Beales was sending back to his comrades was that Labour did not need to go the way of the USSR to achieve socialism, but neither should it criticise the Soviets for doing things their way. Labour had long held the view that Russia should be allowed to experiment with its own version of socialism. But it also hoped that it would be given the same consideration from the USSR, hoping that it would be free from interference from the CPGB and the Comintern. Favouring sovereignty for individual parties whilst maintaining links within the international socialist movement had seen the Labour Party choose the Labour and Socialist International over the Moscow-based Comintern some years before. Even Labour’s internationalism was guided by gradualism rather than revolutionary alternatives.

The main area of debate in the immediate post-MacDonald period was between figures who were no longer willing to trust the idea that change was inevitable through gradual reforms, and those who would later advocate a similar approach, and this began the reassessment of Labour’s identity in the 1930s. Cripps and Laski favoured a much more radical parliamentarianism, to the extent that Cripps spoke about Labour establishing a temporary dictatorship when it next gained power. Beales’ report from the USSR lent loud applause to the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and his ideas here were in a similar vein to Lenin’s comments about

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid, p.144

³⁴ Ibid

parliament in *State and Revolution*.³⁵ But importantly, Beales did not advocate revolutionary action for Britain, and Cripps and Laski did not appeal for industrial and socialist action outside of the party.

At the same time, the role of those on the right was to ‘protect’ Labour from such a shift. However, they were to some extent powerless, as they were either coming to terms with the events of 1931, or they were not in the House of Commons. The debates between the protagonists helped to define Labour’s boundaries as fundamentally parliamentary. The issue became one of how radical Labour’s parliamentarianism would be. The USSR played an important role in answering this question, although its presence came more through the CPGB, as is discussed below. However, attention is now turned to the revolutionary element that was still in Labour’s ranks, but which was soon to be shorn as Labour strengthened its reformist boundaries.

5.2 Disaffiliation: Labour sheds its far left-wing

There were two ideological reasons for the Independent Labour Party’s decision to end its acquaintance with the party it helped to found. The first was the desire for a ‘genuinely’ left-wing socialism to be adopted by Labour to replace the discredited gradualism of the previous era. This idea gained strength from the failure of the Labour Party to adopt a recognisably socialist programme prior to the 1929 election, and the subsequent failure by the Labour Government to implement socialist policies to defeat capitalism as it appeared to be fulfilling socialist prophecies of collapse.

³⁵ V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* in *Lenin: Selected Works*, Moscow, 1977. In *State and Revolution*, Lenin advocates not the abolition of parliament, but rather making it work by converting ‘the representative institutions from talking shops into “working” bodies.’ (p.294) Beales’ attitude suggests that he felt the same – not that parliament should go, but that it needed to be made to work “properly”

The second reason was the growing regard that some ILPers had for the USSR. The ILP had moved away from the gradualism of the official party, uniting around 'a general disgust with the second Labour Government and a commitment to a revolutionary Marxism.'³⁶ According to Michael Foot, the ILP advocated a Marxism to 'suit modern conditions'³⁷. Andrew Williams states that the long-standing quarrel with the Labour Party had to it 'a strong Russian element' as the 'ILP was made up of firm supporters of the USSR.'³⁸

Members such as Brailsford, Brockway, Maxton and E. F. Wise 'had been most vociferous in their condemnation of MacDonald's 'non-respecting' of the 1929 election promise to bind the two countries together.'³⁹ Williams is correct in his assertion that '[s]upport of Russia had been for the ILP a true litmus test of the Labour Party's socialism'⁴⁰ but it is also true that this was the case for other members in the wider movement, as the Labour Party looked into the Russian mirror and some members saw their dreams becoming realities.

The debate about whether or not the ILP should disaffiliate split it between those who favoured disaffiliating from Labour and those who favoured continuing contact. The situation was not made easier with the creation of the Revolutionary Policy Committee, a Marxist group within the ILP, which greatly interested Maxton and Brockway. However, Cohen claims that the 'agreement between Brockway and the RPC in July 1932 was partly an illusion. Differing meanings lay behind the same rhetoric.'⁴¹ The Marxism on offer from the RPC was specifically Soviet Marxism, evident in the supplement that accompanied the *New Leader* on a monthly basis, *New Russia*. Loyal Stalinists such as Anna Louise Strong extolled the virtues of the Five

³⁶ Cohen, *The Independent Labour Party*, p.202

³⁷ M. Foot, *Aneurin Bevan – Volume 1*: London, 1962, p.87

³⁸ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.158

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Cohen, *The Independent Labour Party*, p.203

Year Plan and all things Soviet, offering an uncritical devotion to Comrade Stalin and the Soviet Union.

It is arguable that there was no real need for the ILP to leave the party in this period. It could have stayed inside the organisation and argued its case from there, but the revolutionary excitement of the far-left rhetoric of the RPC may have pushed leaders into a more extreme corner than they would have been had it not existed. This is not to say that Maxton and Brockway would not have argued for a distinctly left-wing socialism from inside the party, but to suggest that leaving the official party may not have been the most important thing on their minds.

Patricia Hollis explains that had the ILP leader John Wheatley lived, his less confrontational manner could have stopped disaffiliation. Wheatley was conciliatory and deeply respected and 'would have pulled the ILP back from the edge. But not Maxton. He may have thought...that he could use the threat of disaffiliation to extract concessions from Henderson only to find his bluff was called.'⁴² It is possible that what the ILP leaders really wanted was to stay inside the Labour Party, but for their MPs and members to be allowed to argue for what they believed in, rather than what the party line was. This is somewhat reminiscent of what Lenin wanted for the British Communists.

The decision of the Independent Labour Party to leave the Labour Party defies attempts to be explained in terms simply of members supporting revolutionary versus parliamentary socialism. At the Conference in July 1932, ILP Chairman Fenner Brockway argued that the working class had to line up behind 'the red banner of revolutionary Socialism'⁴³ but he then went on to help defeat an RPC motion that defined the split with Labour in revolutionary terms. At the same time, those who

⁴² P. Hollis, *Jennie Lee*, Oxford, 1997, p.61

⁴³ Cited in Cohen, *The Independent Labour Party*, p.203

wanted to stay in the official party 'did not seek to oppose revolutionary socialism, rather they suggested that a real revolutionary policy should come from within the Labour Party.'⁴⁴ This train of thought was born out of the failure of gradualism on such a grand scale, and was perhaps best represented by the Socialist League.

The vote in favour of leaving the Labour Party was won by a clear majority – 241 voted for disaffiliating, 142 against. George Lathan, the Labour Party Chairman, regretted the decision. He said that the ILP leadership was now weakening the party and divorcing it from the wider movement, and was 'playing into the hands of our political opponents.'⁴⁵ He claimed that they were 'dooming the Independent Labour Party to factionalism and sterility, when it might have been, as it was during many years, an aid and inspiration to the whole Labour Movement.'⁴⁶

The fate of the ILP was less than favourable, and Lathan's comments proved to be quite prophetic. There is, however, an important lesson that was born with the ILP split, and it is one which parties inside the Labour Party have still failed to learn. This is that parties who begin inside the Labour Party and believe that they can not only exist outside of the official organisation, but also flourish and replace the official party, cannot. The CPGB failed to succeed, (although this was never strictly a member of the party). Oswald Mosley's New Party failed in the 1930s, to the point that he had to set up another party, which also failed.

The ILP could not survive on its own, as it flirted with the CPGB and the Trotskyists, and its membership severely suffered, falling from 17,000 in 1932 to 4,500 by 1935, and this was 'a chilling reminder to the Labour Left of Keir Hardie's belief that socialists must subordinate their socialism to the labourism if they were to survive.'⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.203

⁴⁵ LPCR, 1932, p.157

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Foote, *Political Thought*, p.147

Fifty years later the Social Democratic Party (SDP) failed, and only began to gain support from the British electorate in the 1990s, after transforming into something else. The Militant Tendency also failed to build on the relative successes it had when it was inside the party, when it was expelled. Ben Pimlott commented on the ILP split.

Maxton and his associates, like Mosley in 1931, had misread the auguries. They believed, mistakenly, that there was a real possibility of crushing the Labour Party in open competition for working-class support in the country. In the wake of Labour's humiliating defeat and with unemployment at its highest level ever, the feeling was strong on the extreme left that the final crisis of capitalism was at hand and that an unfettered socialist leadership should make itself available to the masses.⁴⁸

The ILP's split from Labour was not inevitable, given its historic links with the party. But it was made more likely by a number of factors. First was the failure of MacDonald to fulfil the promise that a Labour Government offered. The revolutionaries in the ILP could not see past the 'betrayal' of MacDonald when he was Prime Minister and when he formed the National Government. The second factor was the misguided belief that the ILP could live and succeed outside of the Labour Party without first securing a firm basis of support. Comrades inside the Labour Party were not necessarily comrades outside of it. The ILP misread the signs of this situation, just as it did when capitalism appeared to be in terminal decline. The final factor was the apparent success of the USSR's Five Year Plan, which offered hope to socialists in the chronically poor West.

As was seen earlier, the ILP went on to support a hard line 'revolutionary defeatist' attitude. Ultimately it was swallowed up by the CPGB. It found that the Comintern was not interested in an equal united front with it, as the Comintern's policy was based on winning over as many ILP members as possible whilst denouncing the

⁴⁸ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, Cambridge, 1977, pp.43-44 For a Marxist analysis of the situation of the ILP and the left in the 1930s, see J. Cox 'Skinning a live tiger paw by paw: reform, revolution and Labour' in *International Socialism*, volume 87, Summer 2000

party's leaders. The Political Commission of the Comintern was concerned that this policy should be rigorously implemented, and was worried that the CPGB made it 'easier for the ILP leaders to attack us because of our incorrect methods which turn the workers away from us.'⁴⁹ The Revolutionary Policy Committee of the ILP on the other hand, was seen as an improvement 'compared with the Maxtons', but the RPC was still to be 'subjected to far-reaching criticism.'⁵⁰

The discussions surrounding the Comintern's new policy of collective action between the CPGB and the ILP reveal the level of importance that the Communist Party placed upon winning the ILP's support over to not only the CP's line, but also to the party itself. The united front in British left-wing politics was not built on trust – something that Labourites such as Citrine probably knew. From the CPGB's perspective, the pursuit of a common interest with the ILP in this period had, at best, the same amount of importance placed upon it as the CP placed upon building a mass movement. In the eyes of the Comintern, the struggle against fascism was, if not subordinate to this aim, not the only concern, in spite of the fact that all left-wingers knew just how dangerous Hitler was.

Harry Pollitt called upon the 'Workers' Press' – the *Daily Worker*, the *New Leader*, *Daily Herald* and trade union journals to 'build enthusiasm, power and action'.⁵¹ The three factors important to Pollitt were all of course subject to loyalty to the CP, and despite his call for support from the Labour press, the Comintern was by no means softening its position. In August 1933, it drafted a letter to the Central Committee of the CPGB accusing these organs and the Labour reformists of trying 'to strengthen their ideological hold over the youth'⁵². This highlights once again the fragile basis on which the united front of the left was built.

⁴⁹ RGA 495/100/881

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ *Daily Worker*, 13 March 1933

⁵² RGA 495/100/882, document no. 8205/10

This brief post-MacDonald history of the labour movement was the context for Labour's shift to the left in the immediate post-MacDonald era. Capitalism was seemingly on the verge of collapse and a Labour Government had been "removed" from power by usurping capitalists. This in turn led to respected members of the party such as Laski questioning how fair and just the British system of democracy was. Labourites were also fed more stories about the successful creation of a socialist infrastructure in the Soviet Union, either in newspapers or in books such as *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*. And some socialists in the party had simply decided that Labour was never going to be left-wing enough. This led to the disaffiliation of the ILP from the Labour Party. With this backdrop, it was not surprising that the party moved to the left. The surprise was that it moved so little, and did not adopt a revolutionary constitution or Soviet methods.

5.3 The 1932 conference

One of the most important aspects of the Leicester Conference in 1932 was that the party reasserted what it thought socialism should mean, and it was arguably the last time the left controlled the direction of the party before the moderates regained control. Yet, despite the circumstances outlined above, there was no fundamental shift to unknown territory. Rather, it was the conscience of the party awakening from its slumber induced by the orthodox economics of Snowden and the pragmatism of MacDonald. The Leicester Conference in 1932 was certainly no Leeds of 1917.

This is not to say that resolutions were not passed that specifically stated that the purpose of the party was not only socialist in principle, but that socialism was its main objective. George Lathan said that '[t]here is no political justification for the existence of the Labour Party except as a Socialist body working towards a Socialist objective and determined to achieve its objective as rapidly as possible.'⁵³ Charles Trevelyan

⁵³ LPCR 1932, p.161

said that '[t]he keynote of this Conference is that we must have Socialism in deed as well as in words.'⁵⁴ Attlee supported Trevelyan, and there was a general consensus that agreed that this approach would give a definite socialist lead to the whole movement.⁵⁵ The motion was carried.

This need for a clear declaration that Labour was a socialist party was fuelled by the events of the MacDonald Government. The party was attempting to not only rediscover, but also assert, its identity as a working class organisation that rejected the one-nation socialism of MacDonald. 'The atmosphere of the conference...was one of resentment against betrayal, hostility to capitalism, and enthusiasm for a 'definite programme' seen not only as an electoral manifesto, but as shield and buckler when in power.'⁵⁶ Labour once again wanted to be a crusade.

The left defeated the leadership on various issues. It wanted to ensure that the break with MacDonald and MacDonaldism was final, that that period of Labour's history was buried. But leaders such as Arthur Henderson, an ally, if not a friend, of MacDonald, argued against such radicalism. It was noted earlier that some in the party 'argued that 1931 had been an aberration and that the 'pendulum' of electoral politics would 'swing back'.⁵⁷ Henderson claimed that the party should therefore stick to the approach set out in *Labour and the Nation* and avoid 'false and ill-considered moves.'⁵⁸ At Conference, Henderson supported the NEC line on minority governments, arguing against a 'certain, definite, clearly defined course' on taking office with or without a majority.⁵⁹ Yet he failed to read the mood of the party in this period. He was heckled by the delegates and resigned the party leadership soon afterwards.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.204

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.205

⁵⁶ Harris, *Attlee*, p.105

⁵⁷ Thorpe, *History*, p.81

⁵⁸ Cited in *ibid*

⁵⁹ LPCR 1932, p.204

The left also won a victory, albeit a narrow one, on the question of finance and nationalisation. Price stabilisation was proposed in favour of the gold standard, which suggests that the party was seeking an assurance that the next Labour Government would be a more interventionist one than the last, where Snowden endorsed the free-market. It was also demanded that the Bank of England be brought into public control, and a National Investment Board be established which could advocate government guarantees for capital projects, and would be subject to public control. Planning, public works and accountability shaped Labour's socialism.

Frank Wise, the ex-ILPer and organiser of the Socialist League, 'moved an amendment in favour of nationalising the other banks as well as the Bank of England, on the ground that control over short-term credit, as well as over long-term capital, would be essential for the carrying out of any real programme of Socialist planning.'⁶⁰ Conference narrowly supported this motion, with 1,141,000 voting in favour to 984,000 against. This was in spite of opposition from leaders such as Bevin, and highlights the move to the left by the party.

Because of this conference, a planned economy was now on Labour's agenda, being seen as an essential part of a socialist society. This established the boundaries of the party's economic thought. The free market economics Labour pursued when Snowden was Chancellor were now rejected. The new party programme, *For Socialism and Peace*, adopted by the Southport Conference in 1934, endorsed a policy of nationalisation and at the General Election in 1935, Labour's manifesto advocated the 'public ownership for the efficient conduct, in the national interest...[of] banks, coal and its products, transport, electricity, iron and steel, and cotton.'⁶¹ This assertion in favour of public ownership from 1932 was also inspired by the USSR's use of

⁶⁰ Cole, *History*, p.280

⁶¹ Dale, *Labour Party General Election Manifestos*, p.46

planning, brought to Labour's close attention by the economists in the NFRB delegation, discussed elsewhere.

In areas such as defining the type of *political* action the party should pursue, the Soviet experience helped Labour shape its ideas by focusing on what it would reject from other forms of socialism. While the party had moved to the left of the leadership, it stayed within the traditional boundaries of *British* socialism. This meant that there were no calls for a dictatorship of the proletariat or the establishment of soviets across the country. Just as this conference established Labour's economic thought for the rest of the decade, and also helped define its approach during the Attlee Government, the tacit rejection of Soviet political methods highlights the fact that the parliamentary method was an overwhelming tradition within the Labour Party.

Anything else was seen as non-British. Attlee wrote that there was 'nothing more misleading than to try to apply to all countries a cast-iron theory of historical necessity and to argue that Britain must go the Moscow road...'⁶² A Soviet Britain was not desired by the majority of Labour members. A dogmatic use of one ideology (which defined Stalinism) could neither fit in with, nor suit, the traditions of the labour movement, which drew its inspiration from a number of different sources. Those who did flirt with revolutionary ideas, such as Cripps, were viewed with suspicion by the leadership, and this caused an uncomfortable feeling and a fierce response.

5.4 Defining Labour's socialism: fighting and rejecting Communism in Britain

To clarify the situation, the Labour hierarchy pursued a determined policy making it absolutely clear that the party did not accept fraternisation with the CPGB. From 1933 until the end of the decade, in a clear and co-ordinated response to the cries from the

⁶² Attlee, *Perspective*, p.114

left that liberal democracy doesn't work or that a Soviet dictatorship of the proletariat should be established, Labour's leadership issued numerous pamphlets. These made clear its policies on communist agitation in Britain and also its case against unity with the far-left in the fight against fascism.

The primary purpose of these documents was to uncover Communist activity in Labour's ranks, and to ensure that Labourites knew that such activity was neither acceptable nor compatible with Labour's ideas. For Labour to clearly know what it was, it needed to show what it wasn't, and this led to the attacks on CPGB "infiltration". One of the key architects of this response was William Gillies, who was not just involved in the development of Labour's international policies, but took part in the fight against Communist infiltration and Communist influence in the labour movement.

The Labour Party document on Communist 'front' organisations (bodies which supported either left-wing action in Britain or support for the USSR, but which Labour believed to be housing Communists) *The Communist Solar System*, discussed below, was probably drafted by him, and he was known to 'dislike foreigners or at least to distrust them. His dislike of Russians is clear from everything he wrote.'⁶³ It is no surprise that someone so hostile to Russians should pursue a policy of hard anti-communism in his own party.

It is no coincidence that the Labour leadership hardened its position against the CPGB in 1933. This was a direct result of four factors outside of Labour's control. The first was the moderate improvement in the British economy, which allowed the gradualists in the party to reclaim the initiative, as capitalism was not collapsing. Unemployment fell between 1932 and 1935 and this saw trade union membership begin to climb again. In 1933, when the economy slowly began to pick up, membership was at its

⁶³ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.153

lowest for twenty-one years, standing at 4,392,000. But in 1934 this number rose to 4,590,000; in 1935 to 4,867,000 and in 1936 it topped the five million mark with 5,295,000.⁶⁴

Trade union membership rose more or less steadily after this (except for a small decrease in 1945). Of course, there were still great problems, most notably in Scotland, northern England and South Wales where the economy failed to fully recover. This gave economists in the Labour Party who favoured a more interventionist approach from the Government a stronger voice in John Maynard Keynes, which, as shall be discussed elsewhere, helped develop a more corporatist socialism. But capitalism had not collapsed. It had come under great pressure, but it proved to be stronger than the left perceived it to be.

The second factor came as the CPGB shifted to a less hard-line position. The 'Class against Class' tactic was the approach that defined Labour-Communist relations until 1933, when the hard-line politics of the CPGB began to soften slightly. With a more conciliatory CPGB (it had stopped calling social democrats 'social fascists') looking for a 'United Front' of socialist parties to fight fascism, the Labour leadership grew concerned that this could lead to a growth in support for communist tactics in its own ranks.

If this grew, then so could support for the CPGB to be allowed to affiliate to Labour, thus seriously undermining the party's parliamentary credentials. Labour therefore launched its series of pamphlets and published newspaper articles to make its position clear, thus ultimately reinforcing the anti-Communist stance the party had traditionally taken. The third factor was the coming to power of Adolf Hitler in Germany in March 1933, and the subsequent links that developed between Germany and Mussolini in Italy. Far-right action was spreading across Europe and there was a

⁶⁴ Pelling, *Trade Unionism*, pp.298-299

feeling that something needed to be done to challenge it, even if there were no clear ideas as yet about what that something was.

The fourth factor was the Metro-Vickers Trial in Moscow. Several British engineers working in Russia for the Metropolitan-Vickers firm were arrested in March 1933. This came at a time when the British and Soviet Governments were negotiating the trade problems mentioned earlier. Andrew Williams comments that '[t]here is no clear proof that the arrests were to put pressure on London to come up with a new agreement favourable to Moscow, or that the action was revenge for past slights, but there is no escaping the linked timing.'⁶⁵ The fierce debates that this issue aroused are discussed later, but, while it would be folly to suggest that the Labour Party would have welcomed any of the last three developments, it is difficult to deny that all three strengthened the party's anti-CPGB position.

Two of these factors gave the party an opportunity to attack the CPGB, either for increasing its activities through secrecy (through 'front' organisations) or for slavishly following Moscow and ignoring the plight of their fellow countrymen in supporting the trial of the engineers. But what is more telling is that the party could now lump all extremists together, warning party members and supporters of democracy that there was no difference between Communist and Nazi dictatorships.

To clarify this notion, the National Joint Council (NJC), which represented the TUC, the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Labour Party, issued *Democracy versus Dictatorship* in March 1933. The document argued that all dictatorship was the same, and this rekindled the party's argument from the 1920s when Communists called for a dictatorship of the proletariat. *Democracy versus Dictatorship* concluded with the stirring words '[w]orkers everywhere should strengthen the Labour Party – the

⁶⁵ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.201

spearhead of political power against Dictators, Fascist or Communist.’⁶⁶ The main purposes of *Democracy versus Dictatorship* was to affirm the party’s ‘belief in constitutional principles and its opposition to Communism and Fascism alike.’⁶⁷

Various Labourites including Citrine and Bevin further disseminated the party line through the pages of the Daily Herald. An article entitled ‘Dictators Not Wanted in Britain’ reported Bevin’s speech made at a Labour Party meeting in defence of democracy, where he stated that while the world was full of dictators, ‘[w]e in the Labour Party believe in democracy. I am not going to be tempted by all the blandishments of dictatorship to depart from my faith in the ultimate victory of social democracy.’⁶⁸ The use of the term ‘social democracy’ was an interesting choice, and speculation can be made as to why he used this phrase instead of the word ‘socialism’. It is possible that this was a conscious decision to move away from socialist rhetoric, so as to differentiate the Labour Party from the enemy he was attacking. A shift in language moved Labour’s socialism away from Soviet socialism.

Hector Hughes KC said that capitalist and communist extremists were risking the life of the nation by ‘running it off the road of democracy.’

One of them risks running it into the ditch of dictatorship, while the other would slip it into the Slough of Sovietism. Labour in its political sanity keeps the middle of the road, which leads to the co-operative benefits of a Socialist State.⁶⁹

Walter Citrine wrote *Democracy or Dictatorship* in response to a call for members for a ‘Unity Campaign’ of leftists, which included the CPGB, ILP and Socialist League.

Against Dictatorship, terrorism, violence and the denial of freedom, the National Joint Council, representing the Trade Union Congress, the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Labour Party, has asserted

⁶⁶ National Joint Council, *Democracy versus Dictatorship*, London, 1933

⁶⁷ Pelling, *Trade Unionism*, p.188

⁶⁸ *Daily Herald*, 27 March 1933

⁶⁹ Ibid

once more the principles of democracy which the organised working movement exists to promote and defend.⁷⁰

He continued his attack on extremists who challenged the Labour Party's methods and reaffirmed the more gradualist, less radical approach favoured by the party leadership.

He said that the rise of Hitler was not an 'isolated phenomenon' and signified a 'widespread reaction against Parliamentarianism.'⁷¹ For this reason, the NJC could not 'assent to the proposal of the Communist Party and the Independent Labour Party for the formation of a "United Front" against Fascism.'⁷² The argument Citrine made, as with the general party line, recalled what Labour had said about the CPGB in the 1920s: He remarked that the Communists insisted 'on the adoption of their full programme', that they made it clear through attacking the Labour and Socialist International, that this was to

be a temporary alliance for the period of the present emergency. They hold themselves to be free...to resume the destructive and disruptive attacks on the Trade union and Labour movement whenever they like. Unity on these terms is impossible. The Communists have continuously attacked the Trade Unions and Socialist Parties, and have endeavoured to destroy the workers' faith in constitutional methods.⁷³

These are all relevant points made by Citrine. The CPGB and Comintern had always attacked the reformism of the Labour Party, had continually tried to undermine the leadership and also the tactics that that leadership espoused. So the leadership's attack on supporters of 'Unity' is not all that surprising. But the fact that the moderates in the movement would not even *contemplate* uniting even in the short term, at such a dangerous time with the far right threatening the Continental democracies and Mosley's British Union of Fascists growing in confidence on the streets of Britain,

⁷⁰ *Daily Herald*, 31 March 1933

⁷¹ *Ibid*

⁷² *Ibid*

⁷³ *Ibid*

suggests that electoral credibility and not fascism was the leadership's main concern. As the party made clear in its pamphlet *Unity – True or Sham?* in 1939, 'nothing which has occurred has weakened the force of the argument of the National Executive against the Popular Front. A wrong remedy does not become a right remedy, even though the severity of an illness increases.'⁷⁴

Labour had to ensure that, once all the talk of war and fascism was over, the voting public could not be reminded by the Conservatives that Labour had worked with the Communists, and thereby risk losing the opportunity to gain support from the middle class. In 1939, one party pamphlet claimed that an alliance with the Communists 'would bring some few thousand votes...but it might well drive millions into the arms of Mr. Chamberlain's camp.'⁷⁵ Labour's leaders also had to assess what the party could gain from allowing the comparatively small CPGB a leading role in the fight against the far-right.

The attack on internal threats to the party's well-being were not just focused on the enemies Labourites could see, but targeted more hidden ones as well, as Labour's leaders widened its anti-Communist net in a sustained offensive against communism in the Labour ranks. The NJC published *Communist and Other Organisations* in June 1933, which was a forerunner of *The Communist Solar System*. It listed the organisations that were nominally independent of the CPGB but which were 'actually of Communist origin or under Communist influence' attempting 'to disrupt the Trade Union Movement.'⁷⁶

These included the National Minority Movement, the National Unemployed Workers' Committee and the Friends of Soviet Russia. The message that the NJC was pushing was that '[n]othing that has happened since [1930] has modified the views of the

⁷⁴ Labour Party, *Unity- True or Sham?*, p.5

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.6

⁷⁶ National Joint Council, *Communist and Other Organisations*, London, 1933

General Council of the Trades Union Congress and the Executive Committee of the Labour Party regarding these bodies'⁷⁷ and it urged members to avoid contact with new bodies that it saw as a threat, including the European Workers' United Anti-Fascist Congress and the League of Militant Atheists. It warned its members that

[i]t is well known to most Labour people that it is a recognised Communist practice to establish apparently innocent organisations for specific purposes in the hope of attracting loyal supporters of the Trade Union and Labour Movement who are unaware of the real origin and purpose of these bodies. As soon as one organisation of this kind is exposed another springs up under a different name, and it is difficult for the Movement to know whether any organisation seeking support should be helped.⁷⁸

Some months later, Ernest Bevin ensured that the policy of anti-communism kept its momentum, arguing that Labour should have no unity with the Communist Party. Writing in the TUC-backed *New Clarion*, he claimed that their tactics were

repugnant to decent people, and certainly repugnant to our tradition in this country. Whilst I feel, like many others, that the parties of the "Left" have a contribution to make, that contribution cannot be made whilst they resort to all these underground and stupid methods.'⁷⁹

At around the same time the Labour Party issued *The Communist Solar System: The Communist International* and this was a more direct assault on the international Communist Parties, but with particular reference to Harry Pollitt's CPGB.

Some members of the Labour Party, it said, were impressed by the 'false conclusions' drawn from the 'fractitudinal warfare between Communists and Social Democrats in Germany'.⁸⁰ The Labour Party was certainly correct to hold this view of communist activities, as the Comintern in Moscow issued a statement to the CPGB ordering it that

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ *The New Clarion*, 16 September, 1933

⁸⁰ Labour Party, *The Communist Solar System: The Communist International*, London, 1933, p.1

the 'German Social Democracy must be cited as an example of how Democracy leads to Fascism and only the policy of class struggle leads to Socialism.'⁸¹

Even Harold Laski agreed with such sentiments, writing to a friend in 1935 that the Labour Party

goes so directly the road of German Social Democracy that it turns my hair grey. After a long fight, those blasted trade union leaders decided on non-intervention though they knew this meant a sure rebel victory in Spain. They turned down every suggestion of a united front...I have never seen such blindness in a body of leaders since I began to be interested in politics.⁸²

Laski touched upon the united front issue here, and this was a central theme of *The Communist Solar System*. It stated that the German CP performed its task of creating unity 'relentlessly, even unscrupulously' and noted that '[t]o accomplish this end, they made a de facto United Front with the Nationalists and the Nazis.'⁸³ These three were 'the modern Guy Fawkes Coalition which sought to blow up the German Parliament'.⁸⁴

The Communist Solar System warned against any front action by reinforcing the traditional reformist ideas of the socialist and trade union movement, claiming that the communists, together with the Nazis, were 'fertile in the manufacture of grievances, notably when the workers were employees of a municipality with a Socialist majority', and that the united front 'was the battle cry of Communism at war with German Social Democracy and Trade Unionism. It was a slogan and nothing but a slogan.'⁸⁵ The point here was to re-enforce the idea that communism and communist parties were not compatible with the Labour Party.

⁸¹ RGA 495/100/881, document no.7835/6

⁸² Cited, Naylor, *Labour's International Policy*, 169

⁸³ Labour Party, *The Communist Solar System*, p.1

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.2

Apart from exposing the united front as nothing more than a cover for Communism, the other main aim of *The Communist Solar System* was to uncover all of the subsidiary groups and show them up for what they really were – communist instruments designed to wage war on the labour movement.⁸⁶ It lists organisations such as the Workers’ International Relief – ‘the Communist strike fund’,⁸⁷ International Labour Defence and the National Minority Movement described as ‘the counterpart in the Trade Union world of the Communist Party of Great Britain.’⁸⁸ Its purpose, it was stated, was to overthrow capitalism and to agitate against a ‘false social peace’ and the ‘delusion of a peaceful transition from Capitalism to Socialism’.⁸⁹

As with the other pamphlets Labour produced at this time, the purpose of *The Communist Solar System* was to show rank and file members of the party the true character of the people they were dealing with. The message was clear, and they reinforced the case put forward by Citrine outlined above. Communists were not to be trusted, they believed in a different type of socialism and politics to the Labour Party and they were following foreign gods. After all, it had always been ‘the object of the Labour Party to organise and maintain in Parliament and the country, a definite and independent political party.’⁹⁰

The National Council of Labour continued to denounce Communist activity along similar lines to *The Communist Solar System*. In 1936 it issued *British Labour and Communism*, a pamphlet billed as an ‘exposure of Communist manoeuvres.’⁹¹ This listed more subsidiary organisations linked to the communists, and also questioned why the CPGB and Comintern wanted to join with “reformists”, “capitalist lackeys”,

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.6

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.15

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Labour Party, *The “Popular Front” Campaign: Declaration by the National Executive Committee*, London, 1939, p.1

⁹¹ National Council of Labour, *British Labour and Communism*, London, 1936, p.4

traitors” and “social fascists”. Offering a reason for this, *British Labour* noted that, according to Comintern figures, the CPGB’s membership was approximately 7,000 in 1935. ‘It is the abject failure to secure a substantial membership that has dictated the more subtle tactic of the “United Front.”’⁹² Where the Communists were concerned, Labour’s aims and tactics remained largely unchanged throughout the 1930s.

There could be no unity between Moscow’s CPGB and the British Labour Party in a united front, especially as, according to Transport House, there was only one true united front of workers. This was made up of the Labour Party, the TUC, and the Co-operative Union, already consolidated in the National Council of Labour. This idea was given space in newspapers such as the *New Clarion*, which carried articles by Arthur Henderson and A. L. Rowse expounding Labour’s response to the united front concept, and these articles reinforced party policy concerning Labour-CPGB relations.⁹³ Even some on Labour’s left such as Cole argued that there was ‘no question of a “Popular Front” of the French type’⁹⁴ in Britain. He claimed that an alliance between the CPGB and the Labour Party ‘would be, for us, like a partnership between an elephant and a flea.’⁹⁵

This line continued to be promoted by the party throughout the decade. Labour argued that a Popular Front Government would be disabled by ‘inner conflicts...It would be inherently weak and unstable, divided in its outlook on both home and foreign fronts. Its failure would discredit and endanger democracy in Great Britain.’⁹⁶ It stated that the inclusion of the Communist Party in a Popular Front would be ‘an electoral liability’⁹⁷ and was ‘undesirable, impractical and would meet with electoral disaster.’⁹⁸

⁹² Ibid, p.6

⁹³ See Arthur Henderson, ‘Your United Front’, *New Clarion*, 6 May 1933 and A. L. Rowse ‘The One Way to a United Front’, *New Clarion*, 27 May 1933

⁹⁴ *New Statesman and Society*, June 13, 1936

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ Labour Party, *Socialism or Surrender? Labour Rejects the “Popular Front”*, London, 1939, p.4

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ Ibid, p.3

The Comintern's line on Labour's position was predictable, stating that the Labour Party was deceiving the working class in its claims that a united front already existed in the Labour Party.

We must explain to the workers that there are two kinds of united front – with the capitalists, or a united front of working class struggle. The Communists are fighting for the workers' united front, but the leaders of these organisations are sabotaging this struggle and making a united front with the capitalists.⁹⁹

Such a reaction gave support to Labour's argument that the Comintern and CPGB were not to be trusted. Referring to speeches by Communist leaders, Labour said that 'it was clearly shown that, in spite of their proposal for a "United Front," the Communist International remained bitterly hostile to...the democratic basis of Socialist Parties such as the British Labour Party.'¹⁰⁰

An 'Appeal to the Movement', was then made, reaffirming the party's position. And it reminded members that the 1934 Southport Conference had overwhelmingly accepted the decision that the CPGB was 'a political organisation ineligible for affiliation to the Party' adopting a recommendation from the party's ruling NEC by 1,820,000 to 89,000 votes that stated that 'united action with the Communist Party...is incompatible with membership of the Labour Party'.¹⁰¹ It concluded by 'renew[ing] our claim that the Labour Party is the most democratic Party in British politics and the only effective force whereby Socialism can be realised in this country.'¹⁰²

The struggle within the Labour Party against Communist activity was fought because the leaders needed to ensure loyalty from party members. It was felt that any pact with the CPGB would be an electoral liability once the fascist threat diminished. While this underestimated the danger from the far-right, Labour's leading figures were probably

⁹⁹ RGA 495/100/881, document no.7835/6

¹⁰⁰ Labour Party, "Unity Campaign", p.1

¹⁰¹ Labour Party, *Labour Party Loyalty. An Appeal to the Movement*, London, 1937, p.1

¹⁰² Ibid

right not to trust the Communist Party given what the Comintern was privately saying in Moscow. However, to ignore the immediate threat and to rule out any type of united action against Mosley's British Union of Fascists suggests a paranoid short-sightedness. Labour was seemingly damned if it did and damned if it didn't.

This struggle was also part of Labour's wider assertion of its Labourist identity, as it needed to emphasise the inclusive nature of social democracy, rather than the importance of class. Just as the post-1931 swing to the left was an instinctive reaction to the end of MacDonaldism, this was Labour defining what it *was* by showing what it was *not*, as the Communists flexed their muscles in Britain. The social democratic, trade unionist and ethical traditions of the British labour movement needed to be protected from what was perceived to be a foreign ideology, even though, as was shown elsewhere, even Ramsay MacDonald had accepted that Marx had a part to play in the development of organised labour in Britain.

The reaction of Labour's leadership overlooked the fact that communism was not a German or Russian invention, but instead had roots in the international working class movement, and was therefore one of many traditions that helped Labour to grow. It wanted to assert Labour's gradualist and reformist traditions whilst relegating the more aggressive and confrontational tendencies that had been evident before 1917, and which had demanded close attention since the USSR appeared to be constructing socialism. It was this link to Marx that ensured a continued empathy with the USSR in spite of the hostility from the movement's hierarchy as many rank and file Labour Party members were still willing to work with the "internal enemy" to combat fascism at home and abroad.

5.5 Maintaining support for Stalin: respecting the socialist 'family'

The willingness that existed amongst rank and filers of the Labour Party to work with communists was a child of its time, but also had its roots in a continuing respect for the USSR that was not easily swayed, despite the emergence of disturbing facts from Stalin's Russia. It shows that many Labour members were not willing to be dictated to by a ruling elite in Transport House, and that Labour was a *mass* party that had a respect for its leaders, rather than an *elitist* party that demanded loyalty from its members.

This section explains why, despite all of the attacks, all of Labour's anti-CPGB rhetoric and arguments against calls for unity amongst all socialist organisations, some of the party's rank and file, some party intellectuals and some party newspapers continued to fraternise with Communists, with communist ideas and with the Soviet Union. This was all the more surprising given that news of the Metro-Vickers trial in Moscow and the purges of old Bolsheviks in the USSR was emerging in the press.

Yet many Labourites were still willing to ally themselves with the British Communists and continued to tentatively put their faith in the Soviet Union as a guide out of the problems the Capitalist West found itself in, and this, perhaps, was the point. The USSR also appeared to some to be the best bulwark against Hitler, for both ideological and practical reasons. Ideological because Nazism was clearly the ultimate enemy of the labour movement, emerging as it did out of the apparent death throes of capitalism, and practical simply because of the size of the country and its armed force.

There was, of course, a difference of opinion between rank and filers and the leadership over working with communists. The latter saw them as an electoral liability, and as parliamentary elections were the chosen medium for Labour to put across its message and influence British politics, it was obviously important that

electoral purity was maintained. The former however, was more likely to regard communists as possible comrades in arms against far right aggression.

This was due in part to the climate of the time as there was a 'growing regard for the Soviet Union' described by Neal Wood as the 'most striking feature of the thirties, setting it off from the previous decade.'¹⁰³ While it is in no way suggested that there was mass support for communism in Britain amongst Labour Party members, it was often the case that 'left-wing activists made little distinction between the Co-operative, Labour, Independent Labour and Communist Parties; 'seeing them as different branches of the socialist family.'¹⁰⁴

It is also possible to agree with John Callaghan's assertion that, after 1933

the influence of Marxism could be seen in the ILP, the Socialist League, the Fabian Society, the New Statesman, the Left Book Club, Tribune (from the moment Cripps established it in 1937) and in the agitation for Left unity which the CPGB spearheaded from 1935.¹⁰⁵

The common factor that united these groups is that they were, by and large, *not* organisations with a mass support base. The Socialist League and the Fabian Society did not have mass membership and were essentially more concerned with the promotion of ideas. The Left Book Club, started by Victor Gollancz, Harold Laski and John Strachey, had a very wide readership that included active members of all socialist bodies, but did not constitute a party.

While the Club 'was a huge success, attracting 50,000 members and creating a spin-off of hundreds of local discussion groups'¹⁰⁶ it was '[o]stensibly non-partisan

¹⁰³ N. Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals*, London, 1959 p.42

¹⁰⁴ Weinbren, *Generating Socialism*, p.128

¹⁰⁵ Callaghan, *Socialism in Britain*, p.122

¹⁰⁶ M. Jones, *Michael Foot*, p.56

[but]...effectively under Communist control.’¹⁰⁷ Victor Gollancz, the Club’s founder said that they were creating ‘the mass basis without which a true Popular Front is impossible. In a sense, the Left Book Club is already a sort of Popular Front.’¹⁰⁸ As for the two parties that did concentrate their efforts on recruitment, the ILP had a dwindling membership after it disaffiliated from the Labour Party and the CPGB’s membership grew steadily after 1935 (reaching 18,000 by December 1938) possibly because the Labour Party rejected its traditional pacifism at the 1935 Conference and probably because fascism threatened the democratic Republic of Spain in 1936.

It is clear then, that there was a climate for left-wing ideas, and this, coupled with the threat from Oswald Mosley’s fascists, formulated into action. This does not mean that Labour Party members were converts to communism, as they were still believers in parliamentary elections and supported their party in the liberal democratic process. But it demonstrates a twist in the party’s traditions whereby the membership was more pragmatic than the leaders. By rejecting an alliance with the CPGB, Transport House was asserting its right to keep an ideological purity, that ideology being of course, social democracy.

Yet the threat to British social democracy from fascism was more dangerous than some leaders realised. The workers on the streets were not quite so blind, and it was this ability to see the truth that led to the informal coalition of the united and popular fronts of the 1930s. As has already been shown, Labour members never formally voted for united front action, which suggests that there was no desire to break with the Labour Party. But there was the desire to defeat fascism in Britain, and in this they displayed more pragmatism than their leadership.

¹⁰⁷ Thorpe, *Communist Party, Moscow*, p.227

¹⁰⁸ Cited in M. Jones, *Michael Foot*, p.56

However, before this, Labour had to deal with the trial of the British workers in Moscow in 1933. The *Daily Herald*, representing the official party line concerning Metro-Vickers, strongly suggested that the men were not guilty but covered itself by stating that 'for one Government to pre-judge the courts of another before even hearing the evidence would be most improper.'¹⁰⁹ After reporting Litvinov's statement to Ovey that the men were to be 'charged with counter-revolution, the maximum penalty for which is death by shooting,'¹¹⁰ George Lansbury told readers to 'keep calm and cool, and do not prejudice the case.'¹¹¹ Even Citrine said that no good would come from breaking off relations with Russia.

The ILP pushed a more pro-Soviet line, as the *New Leader* reported that the British Government's response of rushing a bill through the House of Commons to place an embargo on Soviet trade. Raising the question of what an embargo on Soviet goods would mean, it suggested that the USSR would retaliate 'by refusing to give orders to Britain'¹¹² and therefore threaten jobs.

The reaction from trade unionists towards the prospect of losing work due to a rupture with the USSR was one of anger and amazement that their leaders were not doing enough to prevent it. Of course, it is difficult to gauge whether the trade unionists who wrote to Walter Citrine concerning the Metro-Vickers Trial and its consequences were Communists, Soviet sympathisers or loyal Labourites who fell in to the second camp of patriotism outlined above. But there is no denying that Citrine received many letters from union branches who were worried about the possible repercussions after the Trial.

¹⁰⁹ Cited in Williams, p.201

¹¹⁰ *Daily Herald*, 18 March 1933

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² *New Leader*, 7 April 1933

Soon after the trial, the Leith branch of the TGWU wrote that breaking diplomatic relations with Russia was 'a step towards war, taken on the pretext of the Engineers' Trial which was a fair trial in the eyes of the workers throughout the world. We call for an immediate withdrawal of the Embargo and the resumption of peaceful trading relations with the USSR.'¹¹³ In May 1933, the Nottingham and District Trades Council also wrote in support of the Russians' actions concerning the trial. It raised a 'strong objection to the action of the National Joint Council in asking for the release of the British engineers found guilty of attempting to ruin the work of socialist construction in the Soviet Union.'¹¹⁴

This letter was referring to a telegram the NJC sent to Moscow that 'British organised labour industrial and political appeal to Soviet Government for the immediate release of fellow countrymen in the interests of friendly relations between Great Britain and Russia.'¹¹⁵ Citrine, Bevin and Lansbury all signed this. There was clearly support for the notion that the men were not only guilty, but that they 'received a fair trial and fully merited the sentences passed upon them.'¹¹⁶ There was then, clear opposition from some sections of the movement, but while they could make their voices heard, they were not necessarily listened to, as in the face of these criticisms Citrine simply restated that the official party line was in fact the correct line to take.

As the movement split along pro- and anti- Soviet lines concerning the Metro-Vickers affair, it also had to cope with the rise of Mosley's BUF and this began to bring members together, realising the threat posed by the ex-Labour Minister. Geoffrey Foote has correctly argued that Mosley's Blackshirts were not sufficiently strong to launch a stable attack on the British State. He claims that the dominance of the National, mainly Conservative, Governments with large parliamentary majorities

¹¹³ MRC, MSS 292/947/38

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Ibid (National Union of Railwaymen, Birkenhead branch, 2 May 1933)

throughout the 1930s made 'the need for a Fascist movement superfluous for most of the patriotic men and women who, had they lived elsewhere in Europe, would have been drawn to the far Right.'¹¹⁷

This is a valid point and probably did mean that a large fascist party had no sufficient breeding ground. Keith Laybourn notes that there 'were few centres of fascist support in Britain, outside London, Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds.'¹¹⁸ Yet, according to Daniel Weinbren, the BUF had around 20,000 members,¹¹⁹ and by 1936 this number had risen to 'as many as 40,000 members, mostly from lower middle-class backgrounds.'¹²⁰

But the point that is often overlooked is that a large fascist party is not necessarily needed to cause damage and harm, and ruin ordinary peoples' lives. It only takes a small number of fascists to attack a refugee, a Jew or a political opponent. On this basis, the anti-fascists who defeated Mosley's Blackshirts in the 1930s were absolutely right to not underestimate the fascist movement in Britain. One Labourite recalled what happened in Stepney in October 1936.

It was not just a case of Jews being there on 4th October, the most amazing thing was to see a silk-coated Orthodox Jew standing next to an Irish docker with a grappling iron...the people understood what fascism was and, in my case, it meant the continuation of the struggle in Spain.¹²¹

The left saw a threat from fascism in Britain, and was willing to counter that threat in physical struggles if necessary, for example the battle of Cable Street in 1936 and on the international stage, as has been shown elsewhere, as British socialists volunteered to fight in Spain.

¹¹⁷ Foote, *Political Thought*, p.144

¹¹⁸ Laybourn, *A Century of Labour*, p.57

¹¹⁹ Weinbren, *Generating Socialism*, p.112

¹²⁰ Ibid, p.119

¹²¹ Cited in *ibid*. For some excellent examples of how different Labour activists reacted to British and Spanish fascism and German Nazism, see chapter VI of this book

However the moderate leadership, unwilling to join this united front of socialists and communists, 'played down the importance of fascism at home, though not abroad.'¹²² In this statement, Keith Laybourn is correct. Nevertheless, while he also rightly highlights the fact that 'Labour's attitude remained that it was pointless to fight fascism on the streets of Britain since it would draw attention to an insignificant organization' he is wrong to say that the Labour leaders were 'probably, quite right to play down the fascist challenge'¹²³ in Britain. Those who had their lives challenged by fascists on a day to day basis would disagree and it is fair to say that if the left – those socialists who joined the united front - did nothing else in this period, it helped to orchestrate the successful defeat of fascism in Britain.

The rise in the number of meetings by the BUF in the London's East End between 1936 and 1938 - 2,108 according to Daniel Weinbren¹²⁴ – is one explanation for the continued support from some sections of the Labour Party for the USSR in a period when Labourites were made aware of the true nature of Stalin's regime. A steady flow of stories describing how one old Bolshevik after another was in fact a Nazi, a Wrecker, a Capitalist or Trotskyist, and therefore deserved their fate, began to appear in the newspapers, thus adding some credibility to the murderous rumours emerging from the USSR.

In Citrine's *I Search for Truth in Russia*, he wrote that the Purges

made a spy of every man on his neighbour...it was the duty of every worker to keep an eye on the actions and words of his fellows, and to report anything which seemed to be hostile to the interests of the working class. That is why no Communist dare argue independently, or criticise his leaders, or their policy. He is so anxious not to be regarded as a "deviationist", that when confronted with any question he asks himself, "What is the true Leninist line? What would Stalin say?" To argue with a Russian Communist is to argue with a gramophone record of Stalin.¹²⁵

¹²² Laybourn, *A Century of Labour*, p.57

¹²³ Ibid

¹²⁴ Weinbren, *Generating Socialism*, p.115

¹²⁵ Citrine, *I Search for Truth*, p.256

However, despite Citrine's words, and despite the extraordinary charges aimed at men whose names were respected and who the Labour Party and its press associated with the Revolution, there was still a pro-Soviet feeling among the ranks. Letters in Labour's newspapers commented upon what they saw as negative reporting from Citrine.

Sir Walter Citrine appears to forget that the USSR has not had twenty years yet, and in spite of fighting the capitalist world, has really travelled a considerable distance towards socialism, while the organisation of which he is such a sparkling ornament has had nearly a century, and lags behind Russia in actual security of the workers.¹²⁶

Another letter supporting the USSR states that

[t]hose of us who have been fortunate enough to see for ourselves some of the magnificent achievements of the one Socialist country and who appreciate the important part played by the USSR in the fight for peace know that the collection of half-truths and irrelevant details that fills Sir Walter's diary gives a thoroughly misleading picture of Russia as it is today.¹²⁷

While CPGB members or fellow travellers could have written these letters, the general climate of fear in the Western world of war seemed slightly less real with the idealised Soviet Union on side, thus provoking a more sympathetic view from Labourites. This in turn promoted the belief that the USSR had to be kept on side at all costs.

Bill Jones notes that the events in the Soviet Union after 1936 caused a problem for left-wingers. Before the trials, supporters of the USSR could deny that such things were happening as the Soviet legal system had abolished the death penalty. However, [t]hey now faced the choice of explaining, justifying or condemning events which

¹²⁶ *Daily Herald*, 7 July 1936

¹²⁷ *Ibid*

they had previously believed impossible.'¹²⁸ Respected figures such as Malcolm Muggeridge recalled that supporters of the Soviet system would excuse the use of terror by finding justifications for it.

He described Stalin as 'his own counter-revolution'¹²⁹ and wrote that in the USSR

[t]he total abandonment of Law, and its replacement by terrorism, was obscured by the ostensible application of humanitarian principles to the punishment of non-political offenders. The fact that many were shot without a public trial for unspecified reasons of state, did not deter earnest advocates of penal reform from holding the Soviet Government up to admiration for having abolished capital punishment; and even as late as 1937 the Rev. Hewlett Johnson could quote with approval a friend's estimate of a 'colony for criminals adjacent to Moscow' as 'more marvellous than Canterbury Cathedral.'¹³⁰

Yet despite efforts from people like Muggeridge, even the party's official organ tried to find both sides to the story. Hamilton Fyfe's article 'Why There is Terror in Russia' in 1935 criticised both Moscow and outsiders. He did not deny that terror tactics were used, and he criticised the Soviets for this, but he chastised the onlookers for not understanding why such methods were used.

His argument stated that nations could not escape their traditions immediately and recalled the adoption of Christianity in Europe. Europeans he said 'did not for a long time change their habits, their attitude towards the supernatural, nor even their modes of worship. They grafted the new faith on the old stem; it was a long time before the sap in the old stem died.'¹³¹ Fyfe also claimed that there was still a threat of counter-revolution, concluding that '[s]ome day conditions will be safe for political freedom. In the meantime, they cannot take any risks.'¹³² An editorial in the *Daily Herald* states

¹²⁸ B. Jones, *The Russia complex*, p.26

¹²⁹ Cited in *ibid*

¹³⁰ M. Muggeridge, *The Thirties*, London, 1967, p.226

¹³¹ *Daily Herald*, 3 January 1935

¹³² *Ibid*

that this is not necessarily the view of the newspaper. Indeed, it claimed that the judicial methods used were 'worthy of Tsarism.'¹³³

H. N. Brailsford, who had retained his sympathy for the Soviet dream, condemned a 'terror based on lies.'¹³⁴ He said that the 'purge of the Communist Party...recalls Hitler's slaughter of his rivals' and described the trial as 'a relic of the Middle Ages, worthy of the Inquisition rather than a Socialist tribunal.'¹³⁵ Clem Attlee also wrote about the use of violence. 'In Soviet Russia to-day, fifteen years after the cessation of foreign intervention, the method of terrorism continues, as may be seen from the trials of the Trotskyists.'¹³⁶

Yet in 1937, a year after the Show Trials had begun, two readers of the *Daily Herald* voiced the popular opinion that the Soviet Union should be kept on side at all costs because of the threat of war. In their letter concerning the trials, they argued that Britain had to continue contact with Russia and insist on political co-operation with the Kremlin in the 'interests of peace and the defence of democracy.'¹³⁷ They continued with a popular argument amongst left-wing supporters of the USSR in this period.

If Britain could be allies with a Tsarist Government which was also capable of great severity in repression of anti-governmental movements, we ought not to boggle at co-operation with a Socialist Government which realised that it would have been destroyed by armed foreign intervention...had it not been in a position to defend itself.¹³⁸

The emerging news of the persecution and the Show Trials appears not to have completely convinced some Labour Party socialists, in spite of the fact that the

¹³³ Cited in B. Jones, *The Russia complex*, p.27

¹³⁴ Cited in *ibid*

¹³⁵ Cited in M. Jones, *Michael Foot*, p.55

¹³⁶ Attlee, *Labour Party, Perspective*, p.116

¹³⁷ *Daily Herald*, 9 July 1937

¹³⁸ *Ibid*

evidence, as it was, seemed to go against some of the fundamental beliefs of the party's socialism – egalitarianism, freedom of expression and religious tolerance. This says something about the state of Labour's socialism. Because Labour's socialism was still not absolutely defined, and because it had failed to deliver any socialist improvements when the party had been in power while the USSR was seemingly building the new world that many hoped for, some Labourites were still willing to give the Soviet Union, albeit grudgingly, one last chance. This continued until the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939 as Britain prepared for war. The USSR betrayed many people's hopes through this act.

This feeling of 'one last chance' strongly suggests that there was a conscious decision by some to try and ignore what was happening inside the Soviet Union mainly because of what was happening outside of it. Writing about how it affected the CPGB, Thorpe notes that the '[t]error brought reflected shame on the party...Spain offered it reflected glory.'¹³⁹ This is the key to understanding why Labourites were willing to accept the terror, the trials and the religious persecution. The danger that Hitler and Franco represented was countered by the hope that the USSR could play a major role in defeating them.

The fact that some in the Labour press still supported ties with the USSR, such as Kingsley Martin at the *New Statesman and Nation*, also helped to convince people that the USSR deserved their trust. Bill Jones notices that even after the second round of purges, Martin decided that general but critical support should still be given to the country that had adopted a planned socialist economy.¹⁴⁰

This is not suggesting that the *Statesman* was endorsing the purges or the trials, rather that the journal was embracing the rationalist approach of its founders and the

¹³⁹ Thorpe, *Communist Party, Moscow*, p.241

¹⁴⁰ B. Jones, *The Russia complex*, p.27

pluralism of Martin, who presided over an instrument of socialist propaganda that was, by and large, inquisitive and informative, but in this instance could not reach a solid conclusion. In August 1936, it reported that most of the old Bolsheviks including Zinoviev, Kamenev and Tomsy were all gone and that those who were left, such as Bukharin and Radek, were under suspicion.

The trial, if one may trust the available reports, was wholly unconvincing. The accused had no counsel, and the evidence consisted solely of confessions worthless in the circumstances...it is hard to believe that all these orthodox Bolsheviks broke the first rule of the party by planning terrorism and assassination, and even more unlikely that they conspired with the Nazi Secret Police. Zinoviev and Kamenev, under a cloud since 1927...would have been reckless heroes if they had gone on plotting; and that was never the reputation of these particular revolutionaries. The worst interpretation is that the Soviet Political Police vamped up this conspiracy to perpetuate its power on the eve of the adoption of the quasi-democratic constitution. The truth is unknown. There may well have been a plot. But the disadvantages of these methods of justice, coupled with unconvincing confessions and broadcast propaganda, is that they reflect among those who retain any integrity of judgement, at least as much upon the State which employs them as upon the victim it condemns.¹⁴¹

Martin was unwilling to commit to any definite conclusions, and this line was reflected in the readership of the *Statesman*. While there were surprisingly few letters on the subject of the purges, either for or against (except ones from the expected quarters such as Pat Sloan of the CPGB), one letter stands out as it appears to encapsulate the problems that many had in deciding what action to take over the news coming from Moscow. 'I have no admiration' wrote a *New Statesman and Nation* reader 'for bourgeois democracy and earnestly hope that in Soviet Russia the seeds of a better civilisation are being sown, but there is no question that in me, and many like me, the recent events in Moscow have raised serious doubts and distress.'¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ *New Statesman and Nation*, 29 August 1936

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 12 September 1936

As the reader noted, there were 'many' like her. Perhaps a reason for not offering unconditional acceptance of the events in Moscow was due to the fact that there was little credible proof offered to those looking for answers. For years the Labour Party hierarchy had taken a very hostile line towards the USSR, which, as has been shown, did little to dent support for it. Why should the leaders be believed now? At the same time, leading figures like the Webbs, who by now had lost some of their influence but still commanded a level of respect, offered verdicts that carried some weight.

John Strachey believed that '[n]o one who really reads the evidence can doubt that these things happened; no one who had not unalterably fixed his mind in the contrary opinion could read the verbatim reports of the trials without being wholly convinced of the authenticity of the confessions.'¹⁴³ Add these voices to the opinions of 'professionals' such as D. N. Pritt KC, who accepted the validity of the trials, and also to the general climate of concern over the consolidation of power of Hitler and the prospect of war, and an answer can be found.

It is also possible to argue that the wider bond between "socialism" and "communism" bound sections of the Labour Party to the USSR, even at a time when the Soviet system was portrayed in a less than favourable light. In 1926, Harold Laski wrote that the compelling strength of communism is that 'it has a faith as vigorous, as fanatic, and compelling as any in the history of religions. It offers dogmas to those whom scepticism troubles; it brings to the believers the certitude which all great religions have conferred. Above all, perhaps, it implants in its adherents the belief in their redemption'¹⁴⁴ and this sentiment can be modified to help understand why some British socialists in the Labour Party maintained a connection with the USSR.

¹⁴³ Cited in N. Thompson, *John Strachey An Intellectual Biography*, Basingstoke, 1993, p.112

¹⁴⁴ Laski, *Communism*, p.246

If the “Soviet Union” replaces “Communism” and “hope” replaces “dogmas”, then an explanation becomes clearer. Party members who were fearful of internal and external events were offered hope through the Soviet Union’s attempts to build a socialist society in times of economic depression and belief that this country more than any other could play the leading role in defeating the far-right. Even after the Show Trials, the USSR was a fading, but still relevant, guiding light that offered a dimly lit road out of the darkness that was the 1930s.

Laski went on to say that communism ‘has made its way by its idealism and not its realism, by its spiritual promise, not its materialist prospect.’¹⁴⁵ Again, if the “USSR” replaces “Communism”, then it is possible to understand why the Soviet experiment offered so much hope, especially given the fact that, by this time, the USSR had in fact produced a Five Year Plan in which Labour economists could find answers to the questions about the economic situation in the West.

This was clearly quite a trying time for pro-Soviet Labourites. News of the trials forced them to both reassess their allegiance to Moscow, and perhaps offer a more critical, or at least a less slavish support. Kingsley Martin at the *New Statesman* refused to simply accept what he was told by Moscow, by Communists or by fellow travellers, and this was reflected in his writings on the Show Trials. Those who still failed to criticise perhaps did so because they *wanted* to, rather than *did* believe that the USSR offered a way out of the problems Europe faced.

This was made harder when Molotov signed the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939. It had generally been accepted by many left-wingers that a Popular Front between Britain, France and the USSR could defeat Nazi Germany. Now the Soviets had negotiated a separate “peace”. While the CPGB followed the Moscow line¹⁴⁶ the Labour Party

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p.250

¹⁴⁶ For more on this see Thorpe, *Communist Party, Moscow*, and Paul Anderson and Kevin Davey’s article ‘Stalin’s British bulldog’ in *New Statesman and Society*, 4 February 1994

continued to support the National Government and its promise of support for Poland. However, a minority still found it hard to leave the socialist family altogether, and welcomed the fact that the USSR joined the war effort in 1941, although not, of course, the fact that this meant that the Nazis had invaded Soviet land.

The pull of the socialist family was clearly strong. However, as circumstances changed and Britain began to prosper in the post-war 1950s, these ties lessened and allowed many to part company with the USSR after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, thus demonstrating that at least part of the support for the Soviet Union in the 1930s came from the promise of what the USSR was *supposed* to be. When Labourites saw what it *was*, they lost their patience and, in many cases, their loyalty. Dire economic conditions, the threat of fascism and even desperate hope kept some from questioning Moscow during the Show Trials. With the first two factors seemingly removed, the third over and capitalism no longer on the verge of collapse, the Soviet Union lost much of its appeal, especially as the Labour Party had fulfilled part of its promise as a truly reforming party during the Attlee years and shown a glimpse of what it could do.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the tensions inside the Labour Party caused by the presence of the Communist Party of Great Britain within the labour movement in a time when the far-right became more confident in Britain and more dominant in Europe. And it has focused on how this influenced Labour's formation of the party's identity that developed in the 1930s. There can be little doubt that the fact that the CPGB was active on traditional Labour ground helped to shape the political thought of the Labour Party. Labour's socialism remained gradualist, even after MacDonald left.

This has something to do with the nature of British socialism that grew out of British traditions. But it was also a response to the aggressive politics of the CPGB and the USSR. Had Labour moved far to the left, then it would have been open to attacks from the right that it was just another Bolshevik party. But if it moved too far to the centre or right, it ran the risk of being outflanked on the left by the Communists. The presence of communism in Britain shaped Labour's politics, it defined its borders and its centre ground. It is shown later that the party borrowed economic ideas from the Soviet experiment, but it also looked at other models of progressive politics, such as Sweden's social democratic system and Roosevelt's New Deal. These were both around the edges of Labour's socialism, but neither could get into the centre of it in the way that the USSR did.

Of course, some Labourites resented this fact. In 1935, Bevin said

I wish Russia could have seen that if she had never supported the CP in England, but allowed the British trade union movement to help Russia she would have been in a much better position than today...The philosophy of the Revolutionary International can not mix with our form of democracy.¹⁴⁷

However, despite, or even because of, the challenge from the CPGB, Labour maintained its belief in progressive change through parliamentary elections, and thus reaffirmed what type of party it was through a rejection of everything that the CPGB stood for.

It did this despite sections of the party calling for a more radically socialist programme at the 1932 Conference, in the immediate post-MacDonald period. But once the internal party politics and external economic situation had stabilised, the gradualist Labourist tradition won through. This was achieved by the leadership unleashing a sustained attack on extremism that reaffirmed its more social democratic

¹⁴⁷ Cited, A. Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin volume one Trade Union Leader 1881-1940*, London, 1960 p.559

credentials, such as the belief that the existing system could be reformed through parliamentary action. This had always relied on Labour appealing to a wider audience than simply the working class, and electoral credibility was uppermost in the minds of the leaders in this period. This position was stressed in pamphlets such as *The Communist Solar System*, which highlighted the type of organisations that Labour Party members should be wary of, and *Democracy versus Dictatorship*, which emphasised the type of organisation the Labour Party was and would continue to be.

However, the reaction of the rank and file to demands from the leadership not to co-operate with Communists in the fight against fascism does show that Labour was not an elitist party. Grass roots support for the USSR or for united action against fascism showed that party members would not be bullied into accepting the party line if they fundamentally disagreed with it. While their loyalty to the Labour Party was not in question, if the rank and file believed that the wider issues of the day could be best confronted with the help of others, then they would stand with them as members of the 'socialist family'. There was a friction between the moderate leadership and the more radical membership, but the party was held together in a structure that allowed Labour to be a mass party but with a strong leadership and ultimately loyal following. Despite Communist encroachment onto traditional Labour ground, it retained its reformist traditions after a struggle for the heart of the party.

CHAPTER SIX

Labour's Economic thought and the USSR

It is better to have a plan than not.¹

The economic thought of the Labour Party in the 1930s was more or less governed by the realisation that the state should take a more interventionist position in the financial affairs of the country. It is possible to argue that a direct outcome of this was the structured programme of welfare reform and the creation of the National Health Service by Clement Attlee's government after World War Two. But this would not have been possible without the debates about planning and state intervention that took place in the party in this decade.

One of the main platforms for these debates was the Soviet Union. The planned economy initiated by the Soviet Government provoked an explosion of excitement amongst some Labour Party thinkers, who wholeheartedly embraced the concept of planning and saw the USSR as something of an exemplar. In the development of the economic ideas in the early 1930s, the Soviet five-year plan provided a model of working socialism that offered a solution to Britain's economic problems. Labour used the USSR to learn about different economic possibilities, focusing on state intervention and planning, and the party's thought was defined by what it accepted and rejected from the Soviet Union's economic system.

Until the mid-1930s, (Soviet) Marxism was more important to Labour than at any time before or after this era as the effects of the Wall Street Crash led many in the party to believe Marx's prophecy about the collapse of capitalism. This does not mean that there was a mass conversion to Marxism. Far from it. But even moderate party

¹ H. Dalton, 'A General View of the Soviet Economy with Special Reference to Planning' in *Twelve Studies of Soviet Russia*, p.15

members like Dalton found something in the Soviet system that they could approve of. Dalton was

strengthened in my belief that, for a community as for an individual, bold and conscious planning of life is better than weak passivity and the tame acceptance of traditional disabilities, that trial and error is better than error without trial.²

He returned 'after five weeks of talk and travel, immensely stimulated. I had caught a quick but vivid glimpse of a quite new world. And this remained with me an abiding influence.'³

While Soviet planning seemed to offer solutions to the problems brought on by capitalist slump at its absolute worst, once the British economy began to recover in the middle of the decade moderate party leaders turned their attention to less extreme forms of state intervention. The two most noticeable examples were the USA, apparently flourishing under Roosevelt's New Deal, and Sweden's successful mixed economy. It is not surprising that the party looked at these two countries, as both were led by progressive governments who appeared to have curtailed the harshness of capitalism without actually challenging its fundamental basis.

This suited the agenda of the moderate Labourites better than the wholesale destruction of capitalism as outlined by Marx. Lenin's advocacy of smashing the state had never really suited the gradualist theory that socialism could be constructed slowly by a piecemeal replacement of capitalist managers with socialist ones. The moderate interventionism of America and Sweden appealed to those in the party that saw change from above – from government as opposed to direct workers' control – as the correct way to further the cause of socialism or social democracy. In some ways, Labour's economic thought was reacting to the new circumstances thrown up by

² Ibid, pp.33-4

³ H. Dalton, *The Fateful Years*, p.26

world capitalism, as opposed to the party developing a specific concept of socialist economics. This new situation helped to reconcile the two wings of the party – the idealists and the pragmatists – as both accepted that some form of planning and state intervention was necessary to create a more egalitarian society.

Because this was a decade largely of research and analysis, particularly in the field of economic policy, the party had time to assess all forms of planning and state intervention. Various groups emerged with the purpose of establishing a coherent economic policy for the party. SSIP and the NFRB have already been discussed. But there was also the XYZ Club, a small group of City workers who sympathised with Labour's aims. While the XYZ Club was important to the overall development of Labour's economic thought, it had, unlike the other two groups, no particular interest in the Soviet Union, and therefore does not need to be discussed here.⁴

The fact that Labour had two possible paths to tread towards intervention and redistribution reflects the different traditions that had developed throughout Labour's history as a parliamentary party and these traditions found a voice in Labour's economic thought in the 1930s. Labour's ideas had often come from radical Liberals as well as from socialists, and in the realm of economic thought, the conflict over Free Trade and Protectionism saw the party caught between the Liberal idea of limited government and international trade and the Conservative preference for tariff barriers.

Many Labourites favoured the system that saw cheap goods brought in through international trade. But at the same time, this favoured the interests of the consumer over the producer, and this was something Labourites could not support. Fabian socialists noted that the immediate benefits of the free market were only possible because of harsh working conditions and low pay for workers. Jim Tomlinson notes

⁴ For details on the XYZ Club, see K. O. Morgan, *Labour People*, Oxford, 1987, G. Foote, *Political Thought* and B. Pimlott, *Dalton*

that 'by the time the Labour Representation Committee...was formed...this liberal and unmanaged system was under challenge.'⁵

According to Tomlinson,

[m]any nineteenth-century British radicals and socialists defined their politics in opposition to liberal notions about the beneficence of the free market. They emphasised the instability of the free market (often accompanied by a belief in a forthcoming 'final collapse' of this type of economy). They stressed the interests of the worker in well-paid and secure employment, rather than the consumers' interests in low prices. Perhaps above all, they attacked the selfish, competitive environment which they saw as the inescapable accompaniment to free market, capitalist society.⁶

Here then was Labour attempting to fuse a number of different ideas that sought practical management of the economy and the promotion of a fair deal for producers. However, this did not mean that a complete economic programme emerged, rather a set of ideas driven by the various socialist elements in the movement.

ILPers like Philip Snowden took an ethical stance. He complained that the 'instinct of competition applied to the production and distribution of wealth is wrongly applied, and that it is productive of untold misery, waste and ruin.'⁷ He argued that competition 'develops not the human but the animal instincts of men. It makes men hard, cruel, selfish, acquisitive.'⁸ Capitalism for the ethical socialists was simply "evil" or "cruel". Marxists attacked the market and Free Trade, joining the Fabians in equating capitalism with low pay and poor conditions for the workers and highlighted the trends in capitalism that made collapse of the system inevitable.

⁵ J. Tomlinson, 'Labour and the Economy' in Tanner, Thane and Tiratsoo, *Labour's First Century*, p.47

⁶ Ibid, p.48

⁷ P. Snowden, *Socialism and Syndicalism*, London & Glasgow, no date, p.84

⁸ Ibid

After World War One Labour adopted *Labour and the New Social Order* at its 1918 Conference. The party began to formulate a coherent economic programme that distinguished it from the Liberals and the Tories. This document tied the State to a more public, or interventionist, role, urging the establishment of a national minimum wage, the democratic control of industry and distributing surplus wealth for the common good. Yet when Labour was in power in 1924 and 1929-31, the Chancellor Philip Snowden failed to break with the market-orientated economics he had once railed against. This led to the financial crisis in 1931 that saw MacDonaldite Labour accept the anti-working class measures demanded by the bankers, to the split in the party and ultimately the end of the Labour Government.

In the post-Snowden era, Labour's economics turned its attention far away from the market and again embraced some of the more ethical and moral traditions that challenged capitalism. In the 1930s, the question of unemployment and how to alleviate the suffering this brought was of paramount importance, and it is worth noting that the imperatives here were short-termist in their outlook. The question was "how can the party help those who have suffered during the Depression?"

This short-termism then gave way to the need for an overarching idea on how to change the economic basis on which society was run, and this led to an interest in planning and therefore the Soviet system. But in the best traditions of the party, it could not simply allow only one approach. By the middle of the decade, due to shifting economic and political circumstances discussed elsewhere, state intervention no longer had to imply the immediate fundamental destruction of capitalism, but rather better management of it, with a vague acceptance that it would not exist forever.

This chapter looks at the two directions Labour could take. The first section will look at the 'aggressive' approach to planning that the USSR took, and how this suited the

party's thought at the time. The second section will spend some time reviewing the economic models of the progressive governments outlined above. The conclusion will assess how these two quite different models of state intervention influenced the economic thought set out in two of the main party programmes of the Labour Party, *For Socialism and Peace* (1934) and *Labour's Immediate Programme* (1937).

6.1 The Soviet model and the NFRB

Labour's move to the left at the 1932 party Conference saw the party embrace a more interventionist style of government than had prevailed under its previous leader. A need for the party to come out definitely in favour of socialism saw demands for the Bank of England to be brought under public control when Labour was next returned to power and stabilising prices should take precedence over the gold standard. These ideas were products of their time, with belief in the free market generally lessening as protectionism was the new idea in the new House of Commons after the 1931 General Election. But state intervention, and more specifically contemplation of a Soviet-style planned economy, represented the most extreme way of rejecting the politics of MacDonald which had failed to deal with the problem of mass unemployment brought about by the crisis that beset the world-wide capitalist system.

This shows that the party's advocacy of the Soviet five-year plan as a model for the British economy was largely a product of its time. It was the best way of rejecting MacDonaldism, especially his one-nation politics and free market economics. Accepting an economic system that supposedly favoured workers over bosses and offered a planned society rather than leaving everything to the 'invisible hand' of the market sent a clear message to the policy makers that only a socialist programme would be acceptable to many in the party. And there was a genuine interest in the developments in the USSR.

But a main reason for this was largely due to MacDonald's actions and the high unemployment figures at the time. This interest was partly provoked by a genuine fascination with what was happening in the USSR, and partly by desperation. This fits in with how the Labour Party, in general, dealt with the Soviet Union in this decade. (It has been previously discussed how the threat posed by Hitler drove many Labourites into an alliance either with the government of the USSR or with its British satellite).

1932 was an important year for Labour's political and economic thought. Some party thinkers and members of the rank and file were pushing for Labour to adopt clearly defined socialist policies. Some, like Laski, hoped that the party would not only adopt socialist policies, but also class itself as a socialist party, rather than simply tinkering with capitalism. He claimed that it would be 'a disaster to the socialist movement if Labour were returned in 1935...not in terms of the positive conviction that they wanted socialism and nothing but socialism, but liberalism as in 1929.'⁹

This turn to the left coincided with the New Fabian Research Bureau's *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*, the collection of essays written by Labourites who visited the USSR in the first half of 1932. This exercise was the embodiment of the party's need to study other economic models that fitted with the new desire for government intervention. While the tourists were in the Soviet Union researching for their essays, one of the book's editors, G. D. H. Cole, wrote an article in the *New Clarion*, 'A Socialist Economic Plan' in which he states that the example of

Russia and her plan has been a powerful influence on Capitalist as well as Socialist thought. Tories...vie with Socialists in advocating a planned policy of production; and a good many people are ready to admire everything about the Russian Five Year Plan except the Socialist foundation on which it rests.¹⁰

⁹ Cited in Kramnick and Sheerman, *Harold Laski*, p.307

¹⁰ *New Clarion*, 2 June, 1932

The fact that the Soviet Five Year Plan was influencing capitalists as well as socialists acted as a justification for *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*, as what was happening in the USSR was clearly important and influential, and therefore warranted a closer look.

The details of the findings of the other visitors on this trip have been assessed previously, but this section is concerned with the information imparted by Hugh Dalton, F. W. Pethick-Lawrence, T. G. N. Haldane and G. R. Mitchison. These four members of the delegation were responsible for analysing the economic side of the Soviet system. Dalton's position in the party in this period has been discussed already. Pethick-Lawrence was one of Labour's financial experts and became a member of the executive of the PLP after 1935. Haldane and Mitchison were both on the SSIP Executive.

Dalton's essay was entitled 'A General View of the Soviet Economy *with Specific Reference to Planning*'; Pethick-Lawrence wrote on 'Finance'; Haldane on 'Power and Industrial Development' and Mitchison on 'The Russian Worker'. While all of these were of obvious interest to the Labour Party, Dalton's piece on planning was in tune with the specific interest outlined above and Mitchison's essay on the Russian worker held the interest of the TUC. There was of course nothing new in this, as all of the visitors since the revolution found aspects of the Soviet system that they were specifically interested in.

So what did each delegate find? Dalton visited different regions in the Soviet Union, including Sverdlovsk, Magnitogorsk, Kazan and Moscow. The first point he made was that there were clear difference between the Soviet system and the capitalist West, noting that there were features familiar to capitalism absent in the USSR, such as stock exchanges and unemployment. This second feature was something that Dalton referred to on a number of occasions, clearly mindful of the fact that this was a

huge problem in his homeland and therefore Britain could learn something from the Soviet Union.

The demand for labour, he wrote, 'particularly in the industrial centres, is in excess of the supply, and no one need remain for more than a few days without a job. For the present at least, unemployment has been planned away.'¹¹ He later gave quite specific figures on employment. Writing about some of the huge industries that were being constructed within the Plan, he stated that the 'new machine shops, I am told, are the largest in the world...They are designed to turn out 150,000 tons a year of heavy machinery for the steel industry...and to employ 20,000 men.'¹² He also stated that an excavator plant would employ 20,000 workers; a plant manufacturing general electrical equipment would employ 95,000 workers and a clothing factory 10,000 women. This can be seen as an endorsement of the notion that a public works programme (an idea that was popular amongst Labourites in this decade) could be good for Britain.

Dalton highlighted some of the positive and negative aspects of the Plan. On the plus side, he reported that

output may fall short of the Plan, but this is a matter for condemnation, not thanksgiving. Fish is not thrown back into the sea, as in England, nor coffee burnt, as in Brazil, in order to raise its price, nor is corn used to fire railway engines, because it does not pay to feed the starving unemployed in the cities, as in the United States.¹³

He went on to say that

the aim is always to increase supply, even, if possible, beyond the figures of the Plan. The capitalist phenomenon of the "limited market" is absent. "Production, not for profit, but for use," is the governing principle, though the competing claims of rival and

¹¹ Dalton, *Twelve Studies*, p.16

¹² Ibid, p.26

¹³ Ibid, p.16

urgent uses present a continuing problem. But this is solved, whether well or ill, by authoritative decision, and with reference to the Plan.¹⁴

Dalton claimed that the question of whether the Plan has “succeeded” ‘is apt to provoke misleading debate. In some lines of production, and in some districts, the original figures of the Plan have been surpassed; in others not. The original, moreover, have been revised, generally upwards, during the five year period.’¹⁵ Noting that ‘[o]ne of the most sensational of the new ventures, the U.K.K, or Ural-Kuznetsk Combine...was an afterthought, not included in the original Plan’ he makes the point that the ‘planning process...is continuous, not spasmodic.’¹⁶ This was a point that many visitors tried to convey in their works about the USSR – that they were there to study the process of the construction of socialism, rather than the finished product.

While Dalton enthused about the ‘formidable material apparatus’ that ‘has set going a unique type of industrial revolution...in its speed, its geographical extension, and its planned Socialist basis’¹⁷, he tempered any excitement with a look at the particular problems of planning. He claimed that ‘formidable material apparatus’ mentioned above

is not yet organised or handled with any degree of efficiency. It seems...that the standard of living of the majority of workers, both in town and country, has fallen during the period of the Plan, partly owing to its inefficient execution, but partly because consumption has been deliberately sacrificed to construction, and light industry to heavy.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid, p.17

¹⁵ Ibid, p.18

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

One reason for this noted Dalton, was that the 'technique of planning has been developed empirically. There is, as yet, very little theory behind it', but he accepted this because the 'method of trial and error has been courageously applied.'¹⁹

Other problems of planning dealt with in this study included the different points of view between the centre and the provinces. Dalton wrote that in Moscow

when I said that I was going to the Urals, I was told, rather grimly, that there I should naturally hear a good deal from the Ural point of view, but that this had to be harmonised with other, and possibly conflicting, points of view.²⁰

Dalton also wrote about price-fixing and rationing of producers' goods. He said '[w]e made enquiries into this problem both at Moscow and in the various regions which we visited.' But claimed that 'I am not satisfied that we got to the bottom of this complicated question' which also highlighted the fact that gathering information could be difficult. But the biggest problem that he returned to was the inefficiency of the system. Dalton concluded his essay by stating that he had seen 'a grim struggle for the mastery, a pull between the efficiency of Socialist principles and the inefficiency of their execution.'²¹

During his time in the USSR, Pethick-Lawrence was 'fortunate in being able to have long personal interviews with many of the leading financial men'²² in the USSR, including Grinko, the Finance Commissar, Arkus the Vice-President of Gosbank and Smilga, the acting head of Gosbank. He spoke highly of all of them, who he said 'struck me as very able men, and they gave me answers to my questions which were, in the main, full and satisfactory.'²³

¹⁹ Ibid, p.19

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid, p.34

²² Pethick-Lawrence, *Twelve Studies*, p. 37

²³ Ibid

Interested in the financial system in the USSR, he wrote about the main differences between the Soviet Union and the capitalist countries. One such difference was the importance of public or private money used for different ventures. He wrote how, in capitalist countries,

industry is conducted with the assistance of two different kinds of financial backing. It requires long-term investment to provide its fixed capital. In a private firm the partners stake their own resources; in a company the public subscribe for shares and debentures.²⁴

In the USSR though, 'there are no private resources available for investment in industry. Accordingly, when the plan necessitates the formation of a new factory, the money has to be found from the public funds'²⁵ and the industrial bank involved in offering funds charged no interest and 'are to be regarded, therefore, not as loans, but as investments.'²⁶

Pethick-Lawrence goes on to compare the system that determines prices in each country. Under capitalism, the laws of supply and demand generally rule. 'In the USSR it is otherwise. Government control is of so extensive a character that the domain of supply and demand is restricted almost to vanishing point.'²⁷ After outlining where this government intervention appears (foreign trade, selling the products of large-scale industry etc.) and where it does not (such as the sale of agricultural products) he concludes that the 'Government in the USSR has, therefore, with these trifling exceptions, complete control of the price level.'²⁸ However, he does comment on 'the existence of the "black," or illicit, exchange in which foreign currency fetches several times as many roubles as on the "white" exchange'. He

²⁴ Ibid, p.38

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid, p.39

²⁷ Ibid, p.40

²⁸ Ibid, p.41

suggests that this shows that the rouble did not have 'the purchasing-power value claimed for it in the official exchange.'²⁹

The other areas dealt with in this essay are the banking system of the Soviet Union and the budget, and this allows Pethick-Lawrence to offer quite a comprehensive overview of finance in the USSR as it seemed to outsiders in the 1930s. His general conclusions were that the financial structure had gone through many changes before it reached the condition that it was in when he examined it. Unlike Dalton he saw 'many features in common with those of capitalist countries. It has a monetary system which is everywhere in daily use. It employs cheques for transactions between different business organisations. It has a central bank of issue and special banks.'³⁰

However, he also notes that 'in many of these things the superficial similarity of technique hides a very difference in essence. It must never be forgotten when thinking of the USSR that the big hand of the State is behind nearly all transactions. The "trusts" which run its industry are organs of the State'.³¹ He continues to note that in

the realm of prices and exchange the similarity with capitalist finance is thinnest of all, and rugged differences brought about by the real basis of the communist system are everywhere coming to the surface. Gone is the law of supply and demand. Gone are the common market and the single price. Gone is the general price level...Instead, there is a system of price fixing and regulation of exchange which depends on the conscious, deliberate will of the Government.³²

Pethick-Lawrence concludes his essay contradicting Dalton's findings concerning efficiency, stating that the financial structure of the Soviet Union 'certainly seems to make up a logical self-consistent whole which works successfully and provides checks and balances against inefficiency and waste.'³³ He does, however, cast a

²⁹ Ibid, p.42

³⁰ Ibid, p.51

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid pp.51-52

³³ Ibid, p.52

critical eye over the 'plastic nature of the whole Soviet régime' and says that a 'rigid, unchanging system may provide stability; it may be a sign of strength. But the power to change is one of the fundamental indications of life.'³⁴

Pethick-Lawrence had, perhaps, noted earlier than some observers, that the revolutionary and dialectical nature of Marxism was stifled under the bureaucracy of Stalinism. In private, Dalton voiced similar criticisms, noting that there was an 'unintelligent uniformity of opinion.'³⁵ However, again in private, he contradicts what Pethick-Lawrence found, praising 'the fluidity of communism v. rigidity of capitalism. Readiness to learn from experience and change direction.'³⁶

The British reader so far had quite a detailed view of economics in the USSR. The final two essays discussed in this section concerned industrial developments in the USSR and the life of the Russian worker. Haldane and Mitchison wrote on these issues. The object of Haldane's visit 'was to study the power and industrial developments of the USSR – not only those already completed but also those which are planned during the next five years.'³⁷ He made a 'detailed inspection of...mainly electrical factories, at Leningrad, Moscow, Kharkov, Rostov and Kiev employing between 70,000 and 80,000 workers.'³⁸ Mitchison covered a number of topics concerning the Russian worker, including 'The Factory as a Social Unit'; 'Trade Unions and Collective Agreements' and 'Hours and Holidays' – all aspects of Soviet life that would have greatly interested not only rank and file Labourites but also the trade unionist element of the Labour Party.

Haldane seemed to share Dalton's opinion on efficiency of the general running of some things, as early in his report he noted that

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Cited in Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.174

³⁶ Ibid, p.172

³⁷ Haldane, *Twelve Studies*, p.55

³⁸ Ibid

it was found, particularly in Leningrad and Moscow, that permission to visit power stations and certain factories was difficult to obtain. This appears to have been due partly to recent regulations issued by the Government and partly to a breakdown of the organisation, particularly in Moscow. The above resulted in much time and energy being wasted in trying to arrange visits, which time and energy should have been devoted to actual inspection work.³⁹

He felt it necessary to comment on the difficulties affecting his visit because 'they are to some extent typical of the sort of inefficiency the overcoming of which is one of the main problems which Russia has to deal with in the future in order to obtain the full benefit of her remarkable industrial development'.⁴⁰ He said that this trouble was 'typical of the general lack of efficiency and organisation in Russia when compared to Western standards.'⁴¹

Once he got past this problem though, he was happy to write about the successes of the Soviet system. He was delighted to find that the USSR placed such a high priority on electrification (from Lenin's famous maxim), noting that it 'is so refreshing to find a country where the importance of electrification is fully appreciated'.⁴² Such excitement suggests that Haldane was part of the 'technocratic' school of socialism that favoured a more scientific and technological approach to restructuring society.⁴³

This subject was also of interest to G. D. H. Cole, who included chapters on 'Coal' and 'Power' in his book *Plan for a Democratic Britain*, and both chapters referred to Labour's 'Plan' for industry. The chapter on coal informed the reader about Labour's belief in 'public ownership not only of coal itself, but also of the entire industry of coal-mining.'⁴⁴ In the 'Power' chapter, Labour's blueprint of an electrification

³⁹ Ibid, p.56

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid, p.57

⁴³ There had always been an element in the Labour Party that supported such an approach, acting as something of an antithesis to the 'emotional' ethical socialists. Labour's technocrats found their home in Harold Wilson's Government in the 1960s

⁴⁴ G. D. H. Cole *Plan for a Democratic Britain*, London, 1939, p.126

programme featured heavily. This suggests that the 'technical socialists' were becoming more influential in the party, promoting the need to democratically control modern technology and thus ensure that it was used for the benefit of the whole population.

Amongst the other areas of interest for Haldane was the greater role for women in industry. He welcomed the fact that 'a very large proportion of *all* the work is done by women' remarking that this was 'frequently done as well or better than by men.'⁴⁵ He was at odds with Walter Citrine's opinion when he re-visited the USSR in 1935. Citrine complained on several occasions about this fact of Soviet life. He said

...the women were doing arduous and severe tasks which in a Socialist state were quite unjustifiable. They were performing physically hard work, such as digging drains in the streets, ordinary navy's work, pulling down houses, and in short, the very kind of work which in Great Britain we tried to protect them from.⁴⁶

He later noted that protection of women was

an absurd Trade Union notion, completely out of date, according to [the Russians]. Their hearts would be overjoyed to see the women here digging drains, working as builders' labourers, shovelling sand, driving tramcars and doing heavy work side by side with the men. About 25 per cent of the total process workers here are "emancipated".⁴⁷

Haldane however, felt that a situation that enables women to earn as much as or more than her husband 'goes a long way towards real equality of the sexes.'⁴⁸

Haldane found some very positive aspects in his study. The inefficiency of the system though, as in Dalton's essay, is also highlighted. He notes the problems that came

⁴⁵ Haldane, *Twelve Studies*, p.68

⁴⁶ W. Citrine, *I Search for Truth*, p.130

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.195 (original emphasis)

⁴⁸ Haldane, *Twelve Studies*, p.68

with the shortage of skilled labour, such as the low quality of production. And his conclusion lists the other weaknesses he found as '[w]ant of efficient organisation. Defective transport and communications...and Insufficient scope for individual initiative and responsibility.'⁴⁹ The optimist in him believed however, that these defects 'are very likely to be cured in course of time (sic).'⁵⁰ His concluding remarks were clearly aimed at the Labour Party back home. Noting that Russia would probably absorb the better elements of the outside world, he said that 'it is essential that those features of the Russian system which are proving their value be incorporated into systems of other countries. One of the most important of these is State Planning.'⁵¹

Mitchison's essay dealt with a range of issues concerning the Russian worker and this final section will review what she said about those outlined above, beginning with 'The Factory as a Social Unit'. Focusing on what the factory represented in the new Russia, Mitchison argued that, in larger towns at least, they were 'intended to be nothing less than the unit of social and economic life.'⁵² Here, she was making the point that, unlike in Britain, the factory was to be a main centre of *all* life for workers. 'A factory in England may, or may not, have amenities: but in Russia the amenities are not an adjunct to the factory, not a means of contenting the workers; they are part of its function as a unit of social life.'⁵³

She notes that a factory may have a large room for lectures or meetings and could be used also to show cinema films. Doctors were also on hand and a crèche was available for children under four (Mitchison noted that this was a necessity due to the extensive employment of women). With these observations, she was painting a picture of a country where workers were, seemingly, respected and seen as an integral part of

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.74

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Mitchison, *Twelve Studies*, p.80

⁵³ Ibid

society, as opposed to being disposable and worthless, as many workers felt in the Depression hit capitalist world.

In her notes on 'Trade Unions and Collective Agreements', Mitchison is quick to point out that a worker's wages are a 'national matter – arranged as part of the Plan'.⁵⁴ She refers to the fact that, since wages and prices were part of the Plan,

and since the worker's interests as a wage earner are protected by trade-union representation on Planning bodies, the character of the trade union in Russia is different from that which it is bound to have in capitalist countries. In Russia a trade union is not struggling against an employer's federation; it is representing one factor in a Plan, which is the workers' Plan.⁵⁵

She enlightens her readers with the Russian meaning of the word 'collective'. In a factory, this word 'means the factory community and its common opinion. It is the basic unit of that mass opinion and mass intention upon which Russia, as a State, is grounded.'⁵⁶ She was clearly trying to convey that something bigger than simply 'workers' control' existed, or even a nationalised industrial basis where workers have a greater say in the running of society. "The collective" she wrote 'enforces rights and enforces responsibilities; "comradely courts," before which a worker may be brought for reprimand or dismissal, are an expression of "the collective"'.⁵⁷

Finally Mitchison's notes on 'Hours and Holidays'. She wrote that the shifts of workers in factories she visited were seven hours long, plus an extra hour for a meal. In heavy-industry factories though, the hours were shorter. 'I understand that the seven hour day becomes – in mines, for instance – a six hour day. However, she is at odds with Haldane over the length of the working week, which again shows that two people could visit the Soviet Union, see the same things and come away with

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.85

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.86

⁵⁷ Ibid

completely different facts. Haldane noted that a 'five-day week – four days' work and one day's holiday – was originally adopted throughout the USSR, but after a trial this was not found to be successful, and now a six-day week has been adopted almost universally.'⁵⁸

Mitchison was more generous to the Soviet worker. 'The "working week" is five days, so that every sixth day is a holiday'.⁵⁹ As for actually getting away from work, Mitchison notes that 'there is provision, out of the Social Insurance Fund, for Homes of Rest in the towns and in such parts of the country as the Crimea.'⁶⁰ These were designed to provide 'special holidays by way of reward for workers who are thought to have specially deserved them; but they seem to be also available to a good proportion of workers in the ordinary course of things...60 per. cent of miners go to Homes of Rest every year.'⁶¹

Mitchison's conclusion leaves 'it to the reader to decide...according to his own convictions, whether the Russian worker is or not contented and prosperous. My own view is that he is more contented, but rather less than prosperous.'⁶² While she acknowledges that the Russian worker 'is very much better off in the way of such matters as clubs, parks, medical and educational institutions, or holidays'⁶³, she also believed that workers could 'no doubt, do with more food, more varied food, and more manufactured goods. It may well be that there will be little or no improvement in those respects this winter'.⁶⁴ Her conclusion, like Haldane's, is definitely meant to encourage the Labour Party in Britain. 'It is significant' she wrote,

of the spirit of a Socialist State that Russia has sought, in the first place, for a communal spirit, and for a basis of industrial

⁵⁸ Haldane, *Twelve Studies*, p.69

⁵⁹ Mitchison, *Ibid*, p.88

⁶⁰ *Ibid*

⁶¹ *Ibid*

⁶² *Ibid*, p.102

⁶³ *Ibid*, p.103

⁶⁴ *Ibid*

development, and is deliberately choosing by those means, at the cost of great economy and some hardship, to build on a sound foundation and on a colossal scale the first structure of a classless society.⁶⁵

What conclusions can be drawn from this quite in-depth and specific study? Firstly, it must be noted that it is not the aim here to question whether or not these visitors had been duped into believing Soviet propaganda. That question has been confronted elsewhere. Secondly, the generally positive findings in *Twelve Studies* also helped. While there were the numerous remarks about the inefficiency of the Soviet economic system, these were outweighed with the important fact that was reiterated by different writers, which was that there was no unemployment in the USSR.

Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia was a very important book. While the readership of it is difficult to gauge, it can be assumed that it was fairly wide. The contributors represented a wide range of political thought in the British labour movement. The NFRB, together with SSIP, enjoyed support from many influential figures in the Labour Party and the trade unions. At the same time, delegates such as Dalton and Pethick-Lawrence were important members of the Labour hierarchy. But attention was focused more on the content of the book, than the authors of the essays. In the current climate of the Depression, and the new belief in “un-MacDonaldite” socialism, anything with the word ‘Soviet’ in the title had a good chance of being read. The success of the Left Book Club in this decade shows that. *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia* enlightened British socialists about economic models that, apparently, did not rely on exploitation of man by man. It also showed the attempts being made to create a totally different type of society, and Mitchison best described this in her chapter on the Russian worker.

In the wider discussions that took place in this period, the book added weight to the idea that a plan for Britain was needed, although this did not necessarily need to be

⁶⁵ Ibid

the same as the Soviet plan. Dalton made this point. He did not completely accept the view of Soviet economists that 'a Planned Economy is impossible except under Socialism.'⁶⁶ He wrote that it could be argued instead, that

there are many possible types of Planned Economy and many possible variations and degrees of Socialism. It may be held that, even with a measure of social control far less extensive than that which prevails today in the Soviet Union, the adoption of the principle of economic planning can lead to large and beneficial results.⁶⁷

This was laying the foundations of the party's interest in other forms of planning or state intervention. Dalton repeated this theme in his *Practical Socialism for Britain* in 1935, discussed below. As for lessons for the Labour Party back home, the main one was that a planned economy, of some sort at least, could solve the problem of unemployment, the biggest threat facing the party's members in Britain at this time. Despite all of the complaints about inefficiencies, Haldane and Mitchison wrote receptively about the promise of planning and communalism of the Socialist State, while in later years, Dalton remembered that '[t]hey were embarked on a vast economic experiment, which, if it succeeded, would revolutionise the thought and practice of the world. We could learn much from them, and so could they from us. And we must both learn to tolerate each other.'⁶⁸

Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia offered Labour a specific analysis of one of the most important economic alternatives open to the party at a time when the new economic reality realised that capitalism was a system in crisis. Even the Conservatives accepted this, although their interpretation was not one that assumed capitalism would collapse. The fact that writers such as Dalton, who were not necessarily known for their excitement about the Soviet Union, found positive aspects to the Five Year Plan, meant that this collection of essays could be accepted by the moderate elements in the

⁶⁶ Dalton, *Twelve Studies*, p.16

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Dalton, *The Fateful Years*, p.30

party, more so than, for example, John Strachey, who was tarred with the 'Fellow Traveller' brush.

In his *The Coming Struggle for Power* in 1932, Strachey noted that crisis was an inevitable feature of the capitalist system because 'capitalist production is carried on without plan, that its only regulating mechanism is the mechanism of the market.'⁶⁹ He argued in favour of a Marxist solution to the current crisis, which did nothing to endear him to the likes of Bevin. Capitalism, Strachey claimed, could not be reformed or made to work for the whole of society, and must therefore be replaced by a socialist system.

This was an outright rejection of the general Fabian attitudes that had shaped party thought until 1931. The difference between Strachey's work and *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*, was that for the most part Strachey was preaching to the converted. Williams notes that Strachey's 'main influence within the Labour Party was on the ILP's successor, the Socialist League, which was the main self-consciously 'marxist' wing of the Labour Party up to its disaffiliation in 1937.'⁷⁰ Of course, with the economic climate as it was, some non-believers were also won over by Strachey's words.

The target audience for *Twelve Studies* was the Labour Party as a whole, with the aim of explaining how a planned economy works, and also how a planned economy could work if implemented by the Labour Party. The other visits to the USSR have been discussed elsewhere, but this study was part of the wider debate on planning. This debate was carried out in the Labour press and in books by individuals such as Cole, Dalton and Attlee and by 'centre' groups such as Political and Economic Planning

⁶⁹ J. Strachey, *The Coming Struggle for Power*, London, 1932, pp.113-14

⁷⁰ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, pp.205-6

(PEP). The perimeters of the debate were extended to include other examples of state intervention, to cover the wider issues concerning planning.

6.2 From Soviet socialism to the social democratic models

The debate about planning and state intervention was one of the most important factors defining Labour's political thought in this period, and the research conducted and the lessons learned in this decade influenced the party when it was elected into Government in 1945. While the USSR was clearly a great influence in the thirties, there were other possibilities that Labour's thinkers examined. But they continued to turn to the Soviet Plan as well.

In 1932, Dalton wrote an article in the *New Clarion*, 'Plan or Perish', in which he noted that the USSR was at least trying to plan, and that 'at least they are trying, and not impotently giving up the ghost'.⁷¹ In 1933, Cole wrote in the same newspaper that he hoped that the Soviet Union succeeded in its experiment as the situation everywhere else was 'black enough to threaten disaster. That is why all good Socialists must be passionately for the Russians, even if they are not Communist in the sense of thinking the Russian strategy of revolution appropriate to their own conditions.'⁷²

In his 'Local Government and the Socialists Plan', Clement Attlee stated the need for a Five Year Plan. Writing about the transition period from capitalism to socialism, he stressed that during the reconstruction of society,

[i]t is no use pretending that you are not changing the whole structure of society. It is no use thinking that you can carry on as in a time of no change or that you can do the work required solely by operating the existing institutions of the country from Whitehall. A period of Socialist reconstruction requires the active assistance of

⁷¹ *New Clarion*, 12 November, 1932

⁷² *New Clarion*, 18 March, 1933

every Socialist...There must be a Five Year Plan drive put into the work.⁷³

He unashamedly called for Britain to import Soviet ideas, but at the same time reminded his readers that British socialists, unlike their Russian comrades, were not stupid. The local engineer and interpreter of the will of the Government, wrote Attlee,

is not impartial. He is a Socialist, and therefore in touch with the Socialists in the region, who are his colleagues in his campaign. It may be said that this is rather like the Russia plan of commissioners and Communist Party members. I am not afraid of the comparison! We have to take the strong points of the Russian system and apply them to this country. In doing so we have got to remember that people in this country dislike being driven. They are not ignorant peasants.⁷⁴

The PEP identified the various forms of planning as 'controlled', 'free' and 'mixed'. 'The first was the Soviet or fascist model, the second the 'contemporary model of laissez-faire' (i.e. Liberal) and the third 'in line either with progressive Conservatism or Socialism'.⁷⁵ The PEP noted that 'the USSR remains the sole extant example of a State with a national plan and an aim dominating it.'⁷⁶

This final classification could have included Roosevelt's USA, with Roosevelt's New Deal neither advocating an outright socialist answer to the crisis, nor continuing with the economic orthodoxy of traditional *laissez-faire* capitalism. Two things can explain Labour's interest in the American New Deal. Firstly, there are the stories referred to elsewhere about the use of forced labour in the USSR. While these were largely rejected, any possibility that there could be such a betrayal of the movement's labourist traditions would have raised at least minor concerns in Labour's ranks.

⁷³ C. Attlee, 'Local Government and the Socialist Plan' in F. Bealey, *Social and Political Thought of the Labour Party*, p.138

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Williams, *Labour and Russia*, p.206

⁷⁶ Cited in ibid

The second and more important explanation was the upturn in the British economy in 1933, as unemployment gradually began to fall and capitalism began to recover. While the crisis within the capitalist system had not completely passed, with widespread unemployment and misery in some industrial areas of Britain, and unrest in Europe as Hitler used the problems to his own advantage, capitalism had stabilised. The predicted implosion of the system failed to occur and this meant that the party intellectuals interested in the economies of other countries had time to continue their research.

One of the main reasons for the huge amount of interest in the Soviet exemplar was the urgent need for a solution to the great problems of the Depression. Now that capitalism had proved its resilience and the problems had lessened, the urgency for the extreme measures employed in the Soviet Union passed, and while the Five Year Plan continued to hold the interest of party thinkers, some Labourites saw the New Deal as a model of economic interventionism worth referring to. H. N. Brailsford remembered in 1936 how, when he saw New York in the grip of the banking crisis,

[e]very second person to whom one then talked, from taximen to professors, looked to Mr. Roosevelt as a Messiah. Thereafter, for a year or more, even one's friends on the Left spoke of the New Deal in a language of excited optimism that was not a little bewildering.⁷⁷

In 1933 he assessed the New Deal and questioned whether Roosevelt would be strong enough to fight 'capitalist anarchy and turn industry into a public service – to achieve Socialism without Socialists?'⁷⁸ In an interesting article, he states that the USA may be the first country to achieve socialism *because* they had no socialists trying to achieve it, and his argument was logical, if unorthodox.

⁷⁷ *New Statesman and Nation*, 11 January, 1936

⁷⁸ *New Clarion*, 22 July, 1933

The rest of us have talked Socialism so loud and so long that the ears of our opponents have grown a protective armour-plate. In America the average man has not yet the faintest idea what Socialism means. It is, therefore, conceivable, that the logic of facts may drive him into it, before he can shrink back in terror.⁷⁹

Brailsford seemed to be suggesting that an actual implementation of socialism by capitalists without labelling it socialism, and without the internecine arguments that often accompanied the debates, could prove to be a more successful method of building a socialist society than the approach adopted by the Labour Party. This was a partial return to the Webb's concept of replacing capitalist managers with socialist ones. However, there were no socialist managers in Roosevelt's plans, although Brailsford felt that the powerful reality of socialism would overtake events, noting that he failed to notice how Roosevelt 'can stop far short of socialism.'⁸⁰ His concluding remarks correctly predicted that Roosevelt's policies would only create an orderly capitalism with the private owner and profit motive still in command, but while this may have been all that he intended to create, his administration 'is beginning to think of industry as a public service.'⁸¹

The idea that industry should provide a public service was the driving force behind Labour's embracing of nationalisation and planning. It was far from uncommon to see articles in the Labour press asking why Britain could not have a 'public works scheme' like Roosevelt's New Deal. A. Susan Lawrence heavily criticised the Government for letting the situation worsen.

Under the present Government...by the reduction of unemployment benefit, by the raising of contributions and by the Means Test, we have reduced the spending power of the workers by some thirty millions...But further, under the Chamberlain policy, we have cut down all public works, and have abandoned the policy of finding work for the unemployed.⁸²

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² *New Clarion*, 22 July, 1933

She also turned to the American New Deal, quoting Roosevelt:

The second part of the Industrial Recovery Act gives employment by a vast system of public works. Our studies show that we should be able to hire many men at once, and step up to a million new jobs by October 1, and a much greater number later...Our first purpose is to create employment as fast as we can.⁸³

The contrast, said Lawrence, 'could not be more complete',⁸⁴ and she concluded her article with the recommendation that Britain should follow the American plan.

At the same time, Cole asked why the state shouldn't 'create the required additional money and use it to pay wages to the unemployed in return for useful work of a non-competitive and not directly remunerative kind?'⁸⁵ Noel Thompson notes that Cole 'advocated an extensive programme of state-financed public works along the lines that the Roosevelt administration was pursuing'.⁸⁶ Cole admired Roosevelt's 'courageous optimism'⁸⁷ and his determination 'to embark on a radical economic strategy; he applauded too his willingness to take on the opposition to his policies that he confronted in the business and political communities.'⁸⁸

The American model offered a less aggressive, though according to Laski no less sweeping, alternative to that of the Soviet Union. Laski declared that Roosevelt was attempting to 'lay the foundations of a new social order' and to 'socialize the profit-making motive by making its operation subordinate to a body of ethical principles'.⁸⁹ The more democratic nature of the American system and Roosevelt's actions that Laski claimed was 'a revolution by consent' suited the Labour Party more than the forceful tactics of the Communists in the USSR.

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Cited in N. Thompson, *Political Economy and the Labour Party*, London, 1996, p.103

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Cited in ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Cited in Kramnick and Sheerman, *Harold Laski*, p.309

The 'orderly capitalism' that Brailsford wrote about in his commentary on the New Deal ultimately appealed to Labour politicians, and by the mid-1930s, with a stabilisation of capitalism evident, Labour's economic aims were directed towards a gradualist 'socialist management' of capitalism. This allowed socialists to manage capitalism better than the capitalists, and also to argue that socialism could once again be created *through* capitalism without smashing it. This was the basis of Attlee's post-war administration that saw a mixed economy emphasise nationalisation and the creation of the welfare state and National Health Service.

There was, however, no fundamental challenge to the market structure of capitalism with the view of abolishing this system. As John Callaghan notes, the planning proposals of the younger economists in the Labour Party, such as Hugh Gaitskell, Evan Durbin and Douglas Jay, together with Dalton, 'always fell short of a basic restructuring of the financial system in Britain even though the City of London was enfeebled by the world recession and at its most vulnerable.'⁹⁰ This analysis could include World War Two, and the fact that Labour sought to rebuild capitalism, albeit with different priorities, after the war, rather than attack and destroy it, demonstrates that this was never really an intention of the party hierarchy.

The idea that the economy and society could be planned clearly became a key element to the debates within the Labour Party in this period. The Soviet Five Year Plan and, to a lesser extent at this time Roosevelt's New Deal, influenced Labour Party thought, and this can be seen in the party programme *For Socialism and Peace* drafted in 1934. There was no specific reference to the Soviet plan as such, but the inference was clear, and this is not surprising given the fact that Hugh Dalton drafted it. Despite his remarks about the inefficiencies within the Soviet system of planning, the influence his trip to the USSR had on him was more than what could have been expected before he went.

⁹⁰ J. Callaghan, *Socialism in Britain*, p.127

The emphasis in *For Socialism and Peace* was on planning and the desire for a more socialised industrial basis for Britain is plainly evident. Public control over the major industries such as steel, coal and water, as well as banking and transport, was now firmly part of the Labour programme. The party committed itself to the idea that industry should be converted 'from a haphazard struggle for private gain to a planned national economy owned and carried on for the service of the community'.⁹¹ The talk now was of industry being a 'public service, democratically owned and responsibly administered'.⁹² This was similar to how Labourites saw the aims of the New Deal (while the USSR was clearly on a more wide-ranging project). The Labour Party had stated its intent about planning, and the 1934 Southport Conference adopted a programme that made state intervention a core part of Labour's thought, and helped to define the party's political thought.

By 1935 unemployment had fallen from three to two million, and Labour had begun to clarify what a British plan under a Labour Government would look like. *For Socialism and Peace* offered 'the first thorough-going Labour programme since 1928'⁹³ and the party's manifesto for the 1935 General Election outlined a basic socialist programme of nationalisation, promising to 'bring into public ownership for the efficient conduct, in the national interest...banks, coal and its products, transport, electricity, iron and steel, and cotton.'⁹⁴

That is not to say that interest in the USSR had disappeared. Cole referred to it in his *Principles of Economic Planning* (1935) but the enthusiasm for "copying" the Soviet model was absent. Cole had begun to develop a 'machinery of socialist planning' (which was the title of another one of his books in 1938) and questioned whether

⁹¹ Labour Party, *For Socialism and Peace: the Labour Party's Programme of Action*, London, 1934, p.6

⁹² Ibid, p.21

⁹³ A. Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s*, p.28

⁹⁴ Labour Party General Election Manifesto, 1935, in I. Dale, *Labour Party General Election Manifestos*, p.46

there should be a single planning authority for the economy in general or whether it could be organised on a regional level, and it was here that he turned away from the Soviet model. He noted that there were all-Russian authorities covering the whole USSR until 1934, but then this changed, with general planning of production remaining an all-Russian function, but supervision and execution of the plan would become regional functions. He wrote that this was not true in smaller countries. 'In a country the size of Great Britain national as opposed to regional planning need not involve delays'⁹⁵ as in countries with a centralised system.

Cole considered the question of applying other forms of planning to Western countries with parliamentary systems of government. He concluded that

I have been unable to draw more than incidental morals from the actual working of a planned economy in Russia; for the conditions there are so different both economically and politically as to make comparisons save on a limited number of special points more dangerous than enlightening.⁹⁶

He declared that many of the problems that occurred in the Soviet Union as it tried to implement a planned system would not influence the development of such a system in the West. Returning to the problem of inefficiencies that Dalton and Haldane commented on, Cole noted that in the USSR, there was 'a terrible deficiency of skilled personnel, technical, manual and administrative alike, which involved a high degree of inefficiency in the running of the new economic machine.'⁹⁷ But there was no similar situation in the West. Western countries, claimed Cole, had

[a]n immense asset in the abundance of highly competent technicians, skilled craftsmen and administrators whom they are able to command. Great Britain, or any highly developed Western country, can from the economic point of view successfully institute a planned economy with far less difficulty than Russia, and without the necessity for any of the severe sacrifices which the people of

⁹⁵ G. D. H. Cole, *Principles of Planning*, London, 1938, p. 299

⁹⁶ Ibid, p.398

⁹⁷ Ibid, p.407

Russia, in building for their future, have been compelled to undergo.⁹⁸

Yet despite Cole's claims that Britain could and should not go 'the Russian way', his concluding remarks show his respect for the Soviet Union. He was not 'without hope' that, as decaying capitalism became worse, and the 'futility of the existing order' becomes more and more known to man, 'the Western countries will at length overcome the hesitations and timidities that hold them back and show under strong leadership, no less courage than the Russians have shown in facing an infinitely more difficult problem.'⁹⁹

Dalton also still regarded the USSR as a possible teacher, but, like Cole, had moved on since he returned from his trip. While he had been fascinated with the Soviet plan for some time, he had also often stated that there was a difference between socialism and planning.

Socialism is primarily a question of ownership, planning a question of control or direction. Planning is not necessarily in the public interest, nor are those who direct it necessarily agents of the State. There is private planning towards private ends and social planning towards social ends.¹⁰⁰

Dalton makes it clear that he believes that there are differences between planned economies in the west to the type practiced in the Soviet Union. 'For Western Socialists, in peace time, the general object of planning is the maximum social advantage. Our particular objects are to wage peaceful war on poverty, insecurity, social inequality, and war itself.'¹⁰¹ Some of the main objects of planning in the USSR were summarised as avoiding

the economic crises and trade fluctuations of capitalism...to keep the whole working population in continuous employment and to

⁹⁸ Ibid, p.408

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ H. Dalton *Practical Socialism for Britain*, London, 1935, p.247

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.249

raise their standard of living, without permitting the growth of large inequalities...to stimulate to the utmost the industrialisation of the country.¹⁰²

In his assessment of the objectives for planners in the western capitalist states, Dalton appears to be suggesting that planning was possible under capitalism, and this view was clear in his distinction between socialism and planning.

The direction that the discussion had taken by the mid-1930s shows that the party was continuing its interest in the USSR, but also widening its research to incorporate other ideas from systems that followed programmes closer to that of the Labour Party. It also came at a time when some party thinkers were coming under the influence of the economist John Maynard Keynes, who argued for an expansionist economic programme incorporating state intervention. Geoffrey Foote notes that

[t]he practical policies of state intervention carried out by Roosevelt and Hitler were reflected in the development of Keynesian economic theory, which now argued that a market economy was incapable of sustaining itself without crisis, and needed the state to supplement its activities. Just as the state aided capital at its birth, so now it was required to step in as its nurse and saviour.¹⁰³

This interest in Keynesian economics can be seen in the party's shift away from the left-wing years of the early thirties towards a corporate socialist stance committing itself to public corporations. The prominent Socialist Leaguer G. R. Mitchison claimed that these would be 'run by a bureaucracy or by the old capitalist directors and over which Parliament will have no effectual control.'¹⁰⁴ For some in the labour movement, a corporate state would be modelled on the corporatism of fascist Italy,

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ G. Foote, *Labour's Political Thought*, p.145

¹⁰⁴ *The Socialist Leaguer*, November-December 1934

and therefore 'highly dangerous to the workers.'¹⁰⁵ Such bodies, she said, 'cannot play any part in a Socialist plan.'¹⁰⁶

She made her point that the Labour Party was a party pledged to the introduction of socialism, claiming that it 'must think in terms of a Socialist Plan for this country and ultimately for others. It is high time...that Socialists should realise the dangers of a string of public corporations and the risks of a corporate state'.¹⁰⁷ She cited the London Passenger Transport Act as an example of some of the dangers. This was a relevant case to choose to prove the point, given that Labour had taken control of the London County Council for the first time in March 1934. Mitchison wrote that the London Act allowed

the Board set up to control passenger transport [to be] the former chairman and the former managing director of the capitalist combine, which owned the underground railways and other means of transport. They receive respectively about £12,500 and £10,000 a year, and they and other members of the Board are appointed for fixed terms of years: short of misbehaviour or something of the sort they are beyond the control of the Minister of Transport or of Parliament during their term of office.¹⁰⁸

As far as the more traditional socialists in the party were concerned, the system of public corporations allowed capitalist managers to continue to be paid huge wages and continue being unaccountable to the democratically elected Parliament. But this corporate socialism was popular with the moderate Herbert Morrison, who had more control over the direction of the Labour Party than members of the Socialist League, and this explains why corporate socialism became an integral part of Labour's economic thought. According to Foote corporate socialism provided an economic theory that supplemented

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

the ethical ideas which had served the Party during its infancy. The needs of capitalist society, and of the organised working class within that society, were met as the Labour Party incorporated the syndicalist and Keynesian challenges into the general framework of its traditional ideas. In doing so, right and left were united on the fundamentals of a minimum programme of social and economic reform which would reshape British capitalism in the 1940s.¹⁰⁹

Corporate socialism was a logical conclusion to the developments in the party's economic thought in the 1930s. The general assumption that Labour should embrace the notion that a government could intervene to change the direction of capitalism was perhaps the most realistic outcome of the planning debates in the 1930s, given Labour's tradition of gradual reformism. Keynesianism allowed the party to re-embrace the belief that stability in the economy should precede socialism.

This thought process was not isolated in Labour's economic thinking. In its foreign policy, Labour saw stability in Europe, rather than laying the foundations of a socialist commonwealth, as the key factor that would determine the immediate future. And this meant accepting that some form of capitalism would continue for the foreseeable future. This also explains why the party's leadership was unwilling to ally itself with the CPGB, as shown elsewhere.

Therefore, by the middle of the decade, Labour favoured a 'socialist management' of capitalism rather than replacing it, and this coincided with the party's interest in the Soviet Five Year Plan waning and its interest continuing in the New Deal and Sweden's 'middle road' between capitalism and socialism. Labour's economic theories tied in with the *overall* mood of the party in the mid-to late-1930s, as it concentrated on the fact that capitalism was not going to be, and indeed did not need to be, replaced. The main ideas in the areas of Labour's key interests finally had some kind of overarching theme.

¹⁰⁹ Foote, *Labour's Political Thought*, p.146

The USSR was of course, still a popular model among some intellectuals such as the Webbs, (whose influence in the party had been weakening for some years), and elements within the labour movement such as the *New Statesman*. But the success of ‘corporate socialism’ / progressive capitalism, combined with the reduction in unemployment figures and the development by the Swedish Social Democrats of a ‘clear theoretical programme for the Social Democratisation of their country based on the twin pillars of welfare capitalism and the Keynesian steering of the economy’¹¹⁰ meant that the Scandinavian model earned the respect of some Labour theorists.

The *New Statesman and Nation* published an article by George Soloveytchik entitled ‘Sweden’s Successful Experiment’ in which Soloveytchik compared Sweden’s success with the turn around in the American economy, noting that Sweden’s industrial production was ten per cent. above its 1929 peak while America’s had fallen to approximately 26 per cent. below its 1929 level. Sweden was in a much better position ‘than in the boom year 1929, and her factories are working at full capacity; there is practically no unemployment.’¹¹¹

Soloveytchik claimed that the Swedish model was a ‘unique example of a controlled capitalism that works. This was not established abruptly, but grew gradually and developed on such lines as to find a middle way between collectivism and individual free enterprise.’¹¹² There is a clear comparison to be made here between the development of the Swedish Social Democrat’s ‘controlled capitalism’ and Labour’s ideas on planning and the ‘corporate socialism’ that was integral to the party during the Attlee Government.

Labour came to its conclusions gradually, moving from an excitement of the Soviet Five Year Plan in the early part of the decade back to an acceptance that capitalism

¹¹⁰ S. Berger, *Social Democracy and the Working Classes*, p.97

¹¹¹ *New Statesman and Nation*, 23 May, 1936

¹¹² *Ibid*

should be stabilised and then reformed into socialism. Towards the latter half of the 1930s, the party was also trying to find a 'third way' between complete collectivism and the free market. The Swedish model held the interest of the Labour Party because it had succeeded in changing society without resorting to violence. According to Soloveytchik, the Swedish Social Democrats knew their job and were 'interested not in class warfare, but in general welfare.'¹¹³

Listing the achievements brought about by Swedish social democracy, such as cheap housing, a high standard of living for all and a free and first class education, he noted that Sweden had 'solved most of the main problems with which the rest of the world – including the red, black and brown-shirted revolutionaries – is still battling. And it has done it just by commonsense, without any conflicts or upheavals.'¹¹⁴ Sweden, apparently, had made capitalism work for everyone, without having to resort to Communist tactics. Even Kingsley Martin was impressed with what had occurred in Sweden, claiming that the Swedish Government 'gets much less attention than its achievements deserve',¹¹⁵ as he described some of the factors of the Swedish economy.

Unemployment in Sweden has been so far reduced as now to present no more than a problem of seasonal variation in the demand for labour. Estimated revenue is up by more than ten per cent., without any increase in taxation. The period of borrowing for public works is definitely over, and the Government has been for some time past repaying debts incurred during the crisis.¹¹⁶

He continued to comment on the Government's active pursuit of a programme of social legislation, which included legislation 'dealing with child welfare and mothers' pensions, as well as special grants for rural housing and an improved standard of

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ *New Statesman and Nation*, 16 January, 1937

¹¹⁶ Ibid

salaries for elementary school teachers and other low paid Government employees.'¹¹⁷ Despite Martin's continued fascination with the Soviet Union in these years, and despite his admission that Sweden was not socialist, nor was it anywhere near being socialist, he claimed that it was a lesson for Western European countries in the way to manage capitalism in a period of crisis. The 'compatibility of sound financial policy with a progressive programme of social reform'¹¹⁸ meant that the Swedes had been doing for years what Keynes was telling the British Government to do now.

There were clear economic lessons for Labour to learn throughout the 1930s, and the policy document *Labour's Immediate Programme*, drafted in May 1937 and passed at the party Conference in October, showed how far Labour had travelled since MacDonald left, and what it had learnt on those travels. It was clear from *Labour's Immediate Programme* that the party had come a long way since the days when MacDonald and Snowden extolled the virtues of the Gold Standard and *laissez-faire* economics.

The policy makers of the Labour Party stated clearly that the next time Labour was in power, the party would implement a programme of nationalisation. While this nationalisation no longer included a commitment to nationalise the joint stock banks, which had been present earlier, it did include the Bank of England, the coal industry, transport, gas and electricity. *Labour's Immediate Programme* also contained measures for easier land acquisition for public use (although this did not mean nationalising land); holidays with pay for all employed workers and a standard 40 hour working week with higher wages. The Means Test was also to be abolished, and the party sought an improved Health Service. In terms of Labour's long-term aims Cole noted retrospectively that this 'was a substantial programme, not far short of what the Labour Government of 1945 was actually to put into effect.'¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ G. D. H. Cole, *Socialism and Fascism*, p.85

This party programme was not really a direct assault on the capitalist system with the aim of implementing socialism. There was a strong socialist element to it, and also 'concrete plans for the implementation of most of its policies, whereas earlier programmes had been expressions of wishes rather than plans of campaign.'¹²⁰ But this was the socialism of the Labour Party as it was in the late 1930s, with a certain emphasis on planning and nationalisation, but without the promise that a socialist society would actually be created.

The party had travelled a long way since the excited days of the early 1930s when Labourites advocated policies that made it clear that there was a definite difference between the party under MacDonald's leadership and the party in the post-MacDonald era. The early part of the 1930s was when the left was at its most active, and when that activity had some influence. Between the 1932 and 1934 party Conferences, the left engaged in debates that led to unambiguously socialist ideas such as planning and nationalisation being advocated.

The NFRB's delegation to the Soviet Union secured much information about the nature of planning in the USSR and the lessons learnt whilst there influenced Labour's thought on economic policy in this period. The party's programme *For Socialism and Peace* emphasised planning and the need for a socialised industrialised basis. Public control over the major industries was urged, and, while this document has been described as a means of containing the swing to the left,¹²¹ the influence of the two leftist exemplars the party researched prior to its drafting can be seen. The main factors that shaped the socialist nature were the need to radically distance the party from MacDonald and to solve the great problem of unemployment as quickly as possible. While the policies of Roosevelt's New Deal may have been closer to the

¹²⁰ Thorpe, *History*, p.96

¹²¹ Ibid, p.83

gradualist heart of Labour, the promise of good times offered by the Soviet Union appealed to those who wanted an answer to the two problems above.

By this time there was an overlap in Labour's interests. The USSR and America pulled the party back to the left of centre, to ground the rank and file of the party had generally occupied, but the party hierarchy, under MacDonald's leadership, had not. But as capitalism began to stabilise and unemployment fell, the progressive capitalism of the USA, and later the 'middle road' model of Scandinavia, and most noticeably Sweden, began to have a more important impact on Labour's thought. Labour reverted back to its belief that capitalism could be reformed and eventually replaced by socialism, and that socialist managers could make capitalism work for everyone.

By the end of the decade the belief that the next Labour Government could or would introduce socialism had largely given way to the acceptance that the Keynesian approach was better than a full-scale assault on the capitalist system, and Cole stated that the aims of the next Labour Government would not be socialism, but rather putting in place *plans* for socialism. The next socialist Government would not be able to immediately establish socialism in any complete sense 'for a socialist system could not come at once, even as a result of revolution, as the experience of Russia has plainly shown.'¹²²

However, he continued to say that the next socialist administration would be

called upon to make a real advance towards a socialist system, and not merely to carry through a series of uncoordinated social reforms. No real advance of this sort is possible without a plan, or without the establishment of some sort of organization for planning. It is possible, up to a point, to 'plan' without Socialism, but it is quite impossible to advance towards a socialist economic system without a plan.¹²³

¹²² G. D. H. Cole, *The Machinery of Socialist Planning*, London, 1938, p.9

¹²³ *Ibid*

This reiterated Dalton's point, and Labour's general thought, that planning of some form was necessary and better than the anarchy of the free market. But this allowed the long-term aims of the party to get caught between advancing to socialism and settling for a planned capitalism, and from here the mixed economy that Attlee successfully managed was born.

6.3 Conclusion

It is clear from what has been discussed here that the one element that had remained constant in Labour's economic thought throughout the 1930s was that there was a need for British socialists – both on the left and right of the Labour Party – to be able to control events when in Government more than they could the last time Labour was in power. And there is no doubt that the Soviet Union played an influential role in the debates surrounding how this control should manifest itself.

Within this period, the Labour Party became increasingly interested in the possibility of intervention, in taking direct control of situations, particularly in the field of economics. The presence of the USSR, and also the social democratic models of Sweden and the USA, helped Labourites from both sides to focus their ideas on the question of planning and control. The result was a party that agreed with the notion that the economic basis of the country was too important to be left to the 'invisible hand' of the market. Ultimately though, the more influential figures such as Herbert Morrison ensured that Labour accepted that the market did have a place in the party's economic thought, and this led to the corporatist approach adopted in the Attlee Government after World War Two when Britain desperately needed restructuring.

Because of the economic debates in the 1930s, because of the models the party explored and because of the altering conditions in this decade, Labour at least emerged with a plan of what it wanted to do, replacing the loose collection of ideas

that guided the factions before the 1930s. In the party's economic thought, Corporate socialism offered the moderates on both sides a way of combining the traditions that had existed since Labour's birth.

There can be little doubt that the USSR was a positive exemplar in Labour's economic thought in this period. It was the first model that the majority of party members turned to when the question of planning arose, and it instructed them in the art of planning not just an economy, but a whole society. This concept of changing the entire system appealed to more than just the economists in the party, as the idea offered hope that capitalism could be transformed in some way.

In its guise as a teacher of how to plan, and as a leader out of the economic crisis of the 1930s, Labour used the Soviet Union in a positive way, as it defined the boundaries of Labour's notions about planning. It offered images of not only a non-capitalist system, but also one that proclaimed itself as definitely socialist. Where economics were concerned, Labour's identity in the Depression years was shaped by the need for an alternative to the market. Once the crisis had abated, some party thinkers focused their attention on the social-democratic models used in the USA and Sweden. Soviet-style planning still held the interest of party thinkers, but the ideas such as the New Deal promised a less aggressive approach to re-shaping the British economy. The Soviets had always advocated belligerent tactics of seizing and confiscating land or industry, while Labour's politics spoke of negotiation and compensation for those affected by Labour's policies. What Labour rejected from the USSR's approach to economics defined the party's socialism in more of a negative way than calls for implementing a planned system did, but it still influenced party thought nonetheless. On the whole though, it was certainly in the economic sphere that Labour used the USSR in its most positive way.

CONCLUSION

The Labour Party and the Soviet Union

The Labour Party at the end of the 1930s had no time to reflect upon the events of the decade, as its attention turned to Europe. But had there been time for introspection, it would have found a party whose identity was more certain than it was after it left government in 1931. It had not changed dramatically over the course of the decade but that should not imply an easy transition from the way it was in 1931 to where it was in 1939. Along the way Labour turned to the left and then back again to the centre-right, it fought for and secured its position as leader of the organised working class in Britain after its internal struggles with the CPGB, and it used other socialist and interventionist models of government, both positively and negatively, to help define its own political thought and practice.

This thesis has explored these developments in Labour's history in the thirties, showing the extent to which the USSR played a role in shaping and influencing the type of party that Labour became. The Soviet Union helped Labour to distinguish itself from other political parties that traditionally vied for support from the same power base as Labour. The presence of the USSR, and the promises that were offered to the world proletariat by the Kremlin, meant that Labour had to be aware of the powerful working class rhetoric emanating from the citadel of revolution and its satellite, the CPGB. It could not move too far to the centre and allow itself to be outflanked on the left.

But it did have to stay far enough on the left so that possible future supporters could differentiate between Labour and the Liberals. Labour's socialist traditions meant that it was more than just another progressive pro-capitalist party, even though when it was in power it did little to fundamentally challenge the basis of capitalism. The

party's established working class support gave it a Labourist base from which to explore different ways to improve the lives of working people. At the same time though, the 'one-nationism' of leaders such as MacDonald and Henderson saw Labour seek middle class support as well, though this perhaps attracted more middle class radicals than voters.

Finally, it also had to conduct itself in such a way that would not give the Conservatives an opportunity to claim that it was a British Bolshevik party. This thesis has certainly laid this final claim to rest, even though the powerful right-wing press portrayed Labour as slaves of Moscow before, during and after the 1930s. Examples of this range from the Zinoviev letter to alleging that Michael Foot was a KGB agent. The *Sun* even claimed that it had consulted with Stalin from beyond the grave, and that he was backing Neil Kinnock in the forthcoming General Election. But by showing in each chapter that Labour's ideas were, on the whole, defined by what parts of the Soviet programme it *rejected* rather than *copied* or adopted, the party's non-revolutionary boundaries and British traditions have been highlighted.

While there were many socialist traditions that influenced and inspired the Labour Party, it has been argued here that Marxism in its Soviet form was the most important of these specifically ideological influences in the 1930s. It was shown in Chapter One that the USSR posed more of a challenge to the Labour Party than any other country because of the shared belief in socialism. This meant that the Soviet Union was used as a gauge by which Labour could 'measure' its own socialist ideas, while the party simultaneously blended other interpretations of socialism which led to an eclectic socialism.

Looking at the USSR could be like gazing into a broken mirror as Labour saw a reflection of itself that offered a vision of socialism, but one that was not its own vision. Soviet communists spoke of socialism, workers' rights, freedom, equality and

internationalism. These (together with a planned economy later) were all facets of Labour's inclusive socialism, yet they did not quite look the same in this mirror. Socialism meant more than just the 'workers' party' forming a Government. Workers' rights for communists meant workers' control, not just a greater say for the trade unions. A planned economy entailed more than just nationalising the country's key industries. Freedom and equality meant freedom and equality for proletarians only – there was no room for an extension of these ideals to other classes. Indeed, the other classes were to be eliminated. Labour therefore saw a refracted image in this cracked mirror. The image *looked* like socialism, but not *necessarily* the socialism that Labourites grew up knowing.

The party's overarching faith though, could be found within the specific boundaries that were set through its own history and confirmed through its dealings with the USSR and the Comintern. After the revolutions of 1917 and the end of World War One, Labour moved gently to the left, whilst being careful not to alienate traditionally non-Labour voters. While the Leeds Conference in June 1917 saw moderate Labourites such as MacDonald and Snowden endorse revolutionary tactics, and the party adopted the socialist Clause IV in 1918, Labour on the whole never seriously considered adopting a more Russian approach, despite opponents' claims that it was a "Bolshevik" Labour Party.

It constantly reaffirmed its belief in parliamentary rather than revolutionary democracy, reform over revolution, compensation rather than expropriation and 'political' rather than 'industrial' tactics, most noticeably through the battles it had with the communists discussed in Chapter Five. In the important sphere of internal party politics, Labour's ideas were defined by its reaction to the actions of the Comintern and CPGB. The USSR was clearly and most definitely used in a negative way, as a negative definer of Labour's ideas.

This also came through in the language used in party pamphlets such as *Democracy versus Dictatorship* and *The Communist Solar System*. The USSR was sometimes portrayed as a less aggressive or more progressive dictatorship than Nazi Germany, but party members were still constantly reminded that it was a dictatorship nonetheless. By linking the two (in the same way that Cold War historians of the USSR did as they created the 'Totalitarian' model of Soviet history) Labourites who flirted with communism, or who openly advocated a United or Popular Front with the CPGB, were reminded that the leaders in the Kremlin and workers, soldiers and peasants in the country answered to only one man who ruled over the USSR like a Tsar. The very title *Democracy versus Dictatorship* leaves little to the imagination, and this case was helped by news of the Show Trials later in the decade.

It has, however, also been shown that Labour used the Soviet Union in positive ways as well. After Lenin's death and Trotsky's removal from the CPSU, Labour's leaders seemed more comfortable dealing with what they saw as 'moderate' Bolsheviks who favoured Socialism In One Country and a mixed economy (NEP in the 1920s), and who in the 1930s became more conservative, thus posing even less of a threat to the West. Even some British businessmen supported trading with the USSR, and this gave leaders such as MacDonald the courage to continue pursuing a pro-Soviet foreign policy.

In the early 1930s, the Soviet Five Year Plan heavily influenced the party's economic ideas, with Dalton extolling the virtues of planning for some years after his return from the USSR in 1932. It was here that the model of Soviet socialism was at its most relevant and most accepted in the Labour ranks. The economic climate dictated that new ideas were needed, and these ideas had to promise something that would challenge the existing order whilst offering hope to those who had been hit so hard and in such a devastating way by the Great Depression. Yet once again Labour's other socialisms exerted influence to ensure that the USSR was not the only example, and

as capitalism stabilised, America's New Deal and the economy of social democratic Sweden offered a less extreme solution to Britain's problems. Labour leaned towards a 'middle road' between capitalism and socialism, as it chose the "socialist management" of capitalism rather than pursuing policies that would help to end it.

In Labour's foreign policy, the Soviet Union was seen in a mostly positive light, though there was still concern from the right of the party that it would seek to exert its influence across Europe in a revolutionary, rather than military sense. Hugh Dalton hoped that the USSR would join the League of Nations and participate in the Collective Security campaign against fascism. The size and military might of the country meant that it would be a key ally if war became a reality. Some on the left such as Cole and H. N. Brailsford advocated such a practical use of the USSR as well, whilst also proposing the spreading of socialist ideas, and this shows that there was some common ground between the left and right of the party.

But there was still mistrust from the party's hierarchy, as the Comintern's position was one of belligerence towards social democrats, until it moved away from its 'Class against class' policy in 1933. Labour leaders saw this as the Kremlin's view as well, despite the differences between Narkomindel and the Comintern. Therefore, calls from within the Labour Party to defend the USSR at all costs seemed at best misguided, at worst disloyal. Those on the left, such as Cole, still saw an influential role for the Soviets in terms of spreading socialism across Europe. This of course was not Henderson's main interest, as he and his comrades followed the traditional gradualist approach, prioritising stability and security over international socialism.

Foreign policy was possibly the most complicated issue for Labour to deal with where the USSR was concerned. Utilising the Soviet Union had always been a cornerstone of the party's policy, but the many conflicting interests ranging from defending the Soviet Union to defending stability in Europe (and the minority ILP's calls for a class

war through its association with Trotskyists) meant that a coherent policy was not supported by the overwhelming majority of the party until well after the middle of the decade. This also saw the party accept that rearmament may be necessary to defend liberal democracy against Hitler's forces.

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from this study of the Labour Party and Soviet Union. Firstly, that the USSR played a key role in helping Labour to establish what type of party it was in the 1930s, which turned into a decade of self-discovery. Although the party ultimately re-established its traditional parliamentary boundaries and reaffirmed itself as a leftist social democratic party, it did so because of the Soviet Union's presence, partly because that was what it was and would always be, and partly to avoid being labelled a "Bolshevik" Labour Party.

Secondly, it is important to note that while Labour defined itself by what it was not, it did borrow some ideas from the USSR, importing them with the intention of shaping them to fit British conditions and circumstances. This is most noticeable in the party's debates on planning, and without the numerous discussions about the type of planning suitable for Britain, the 1945 Government would not have adopted the policies it did. The USSR therefore became a means of resolving problems, especially whilst Labour was in Government. Examples of this can be seen in the trade negotiations between the two Governments, which Labour hoped would bring jobs to British workers, and in the belief that bringing the Soviet Union into the League of Nations would create a stable Europe.

This leads onto the next conclusion, which highlights the fact that Labour was both a pragmatic and ideological party, and the USSR was utilised by both sides, in both ways. Those who were more pragmatic, favouring a more gradualist approach to reorganising society, looked to the USSR to fulfil a role of stabiliser in Europe, through the traditional means of trade agreements and ambassadors. Those on the left,

like Cole, who were willing to work with the right-wing leadership, saw a more ideological role for the USSR, as a teacher in terms of planning and a partner in spreading socialism across Europe. Both saw it as a bastion against the spread of fascism.

The far-left in the party was also split. Cripps and his supporters who later worked on *Tribune* called for the defence of the Soviet Union, whilst the ILP called for revolutionary international socialism. All sides therefore broke the USSR down, and rather than viewing it as a large Communist entity, picked and chose which elements of Soviet socialism to copy and which to reject. The USSR offered something to everyone. But it also represented a threat. So some could use it as an economic model, as a partner for peace, or as an example of how socialism could be organised 'from the top down' or from the 'bottom up'. But within the internal politics of the Labour Party itself, it was something to be feared, distrusted and fought against – it could not, therefore, be allowed to encroach on Labour territory.

There is little doubt that the USSR offered socialists in the Labour Party hope, as the perception was that the USSR was an existing model of working socialism, and as such a success in a sea of disaster. This hope remained strong in the hearts of many socialists, who refused to accept criticism of a member of the socialist family, even when facts showing the harsh reality of life in Stalin's Russia seemed irrefutable. This perhaps says more about events at the time than it does about individuals, as the economic devastation wreaking havoc in the West seemed unable to penetrate the mighty Five Year Plan, and the Communists, for whatever reasons, often led the protests on the streets against the British fascists.

Context is therefore very important when attempting to understand why Stalin's dictatorship could retain the support of loyal Labourites who often came from a Methodist or pacifist background. However, party members' interest in Soviet affairs

did lessen as the economy stabilised in Britain, which strongly suggests that there was a relationship between crises and support for the USSR.

The presence of the Soviet Union also ensured that socialism kept its traditional role as one of the forces that drove Labour. Socialism had always played a part in forming the party's ideas, and as the party measured itself against the USSR, the socialism of the Labour Party had to offer members more than just words. The strong Labourist tradition tied trade unionists to the party, but the promise of socialism also attracted those without hope. Even though it has never attempted to create a Socialist State when in government, Labour has historically chosen working class rhetoric as a means of keeping its traditional supporters. This ensured that these supporters did not look elsewhere – either to the USSR or to the other socialist traditions – for answers.

The Soviet Union as part of Labour's history

The final conclusion to be drawn is that the history of the Labour Party cannot be written without significant attention being paid to the role of the Soviet Union in the party's development. It was much more than simply a troublesome relation in the socialist family, or a country that could offer either ideas on how to plan an economy or protection against Hitler. It was an important definer of the Labour Party's ideas and actions when it was in and out of government. At the same time, studying the influence that the USSR had on the Labour Party cannot be confined simply to the 1930s, partly because it is necessary to place it in the context of the other socialist and leftist traditions inside the Labour Party, and partly because this is a question of how ideas helped form the Labour Party of today.

This means that a study such as this cuts across the historiography within Labour history. While this is a history of relations between Labour and the USSR, which adds to the work in this specific field, one of the undercurrent themes has been to assess the

ideas and actions of the party in the 1930s and to establish what part was played by the USSR in forging them. These ideas were central in resolving the clash that occurred between the different views of politics, power and opposition. The concept that gradual reforms could change society was challenged by promises from an aggressive and radical ideology that sought the overhaul of the capitalist system. This thesis therefore adds to the historiography concerning Labour's political thought as well as Labour's attitude to the USSR.

In terms of adding to the overall historiography of Labour's history, this thesis has offered an in-depth study of the party in the 1930s, which was necessary due to the severe lack of such histories. The research into Labour and the USSR in this period either stops at 1934 with Williams' book (or 1935 with his article), or relies on Jones' detailed but limited chapters on the 1930s in his work. Works that deal with other areas of Labour's history here tend to relegate the USSR to a lowly position, apart from Pimlott's research on the Labour left.

Where it has added specifically to the histories of Labour-Soviet relations is to suggest an importance of ideas that the other authors did not concentrate on. This is not to suggest a weakness in their works, simply a different emphasis in this research. But this thesis definitely disputes the claim by Graubard that '[t]he Labour Party's struggle with communist ideology...had no important political consequences'¹ In fact, the opposite is true. While Jones is correct to note that 'Labour's involvement with the idea of a workers' State in Russia had a subtle but profound effect upon British socialism at home',² the truth is that it was a major influence. Communist, or more specifically Soviet, ideology, forced Labour to determine its own ideology and clearly establish boundaries for its own socialism that could not be broken.

¹ Graubard, *British Labour*, p.6

² Jones, *Russia complex*, p.vii

Ideas could vie for supremacy within those boundaries, and Labour discussed socialist, social democratic, radical Liberal and progressive ideas, all of which have been discussed in the many histories of the party. But each idea had to accept that the party was parliamentary and reformist – anything after that, no matter how radical, would at least be acknowledged and discussed. These ideas were often what distinguished those on the left from those on the right of the party. It is important to note though, that this struggle for supremacy often allowed the leader of the party to be able to claim that he represented the *real* Labour Party, as Labour's political thought was so eclectic. Labour's federal structure also promoted an inclusiveness that ensured that Soviet Marxism remained an interest, as it did not split into two factions (socialist and communist) like the European Social Democrats did after World War One.

There are still areas of this topic that need to be studied. Many of Labour's histories have focused on the internal debates. It would be very interesting to expand the research on different influences *inside* the party to explore the different models of progressive thought *outside* of the party. The USSR has been the focus here, but there is still Labour's interest in Roosevelt's New Deal and the social democracy of Sweden to be fully examined. The timeframe could be widened to incorporate the European socialist parties before and during the Cold War, and also New Labour's courting of the American Democrats during the 1990s.

For Labour and the USSR, research could build upon Bill Jones' work and look at how Labour saw the USSR during *détente*, and Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*'. How did the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union effect socialism within the Labour Party? Did the New World Order in post-Communist times help the rise of New Labour? And in the 1930s relations between

the Labour Party and CPGB needs closer attention,³ focusing not only on the battles inside the party, but also on the alliances forged whilst fighting fascism in Britain and in Spain. It is the hope that this thesis will act as a starting point for studies into these areas just as the works mentioned above were an excellent starting point for this study.

The 1930s and Labour's future

Finally, it is necessary to place the 1930s and the lessons learned in this decade within the context of Labour's wider history when it was out of power for a significant length of time. It has been suggested that realistic party members knew that it would be out of power for a long time, accepting that the party could not win the next General Election in 1935, as the task was simply too great. The same thoughts must have occurred to many in 1979, and subsequently both of the long periods in opposition saw Labour transform itself into a different party.

At the end of the 1930s, and more importantly by the time Attlee formed his Government in 1945, the party was more confident in its ideals. This was due to the discussions that took place, and the battles that were won and lost in this decade. Attlee's administration was the most radical left-of-centre government in Britain's history, in that it established many institutions, such as the NHS, that were genuinely designed to help the poorer sections of society. While other Labour Governments may have had moderate successes, the 1945 Government at least relieved the suffering that was evident after World War Two, and it offered hope that Labour could deliver a better system than the one that gave the world the Great Depression, fascism and war.

³ Andrew Thorpe's work on the CPGB and Moscow offers some details on this subject, but it is not the main focus of his book

After the defeat in 1979, Labour again instinctively shifted leftwards, just as it did after 1931, adopting the infamous General Election Manifesto in 1983. However, once that approach failed, the notion that the party was too left-wing developed, and the party began to reassess its ideals. The transition from Labour to New Labour had begun. The right of the party took control and, by the 1990s, with Tony Blair as leader, modelled itself upon the American Democrats.

With Blair as leader, the party moved further to the centre-right than it ever has done in its history, not only re-embracing the 'one-nation' ideals that had driven Ramsay MacDonald but openly accepting that free market economics rule and that capitalism may be reformed, but not replaced. The difference with this leader of the party is that he has never tried to hide the fact that he is troubled by Labour's affiliation with the trade unions, and with its Labourist and socialist past. And this has, in the long-term, caused problems within the labour movement. The ideological struggles between left and right could not be suppressed forever, and the left is now making claims to 'reclaim' the party.

This is now a period of redefining Labour again – what it stands for and what its purpose is, and there is still a battle between left and right. Tony Blair has appealed to venture capitalists and big business, claiming that he has 'scars on his back' from fighting 'wreckers' in the public sector, while John Prescott, sometimes called the 'voice of Old Labour' responded with more traditional words about the public sector correcting the private sector's mistakes.⁴

The class rhetoric of the past still lives on in the party, and traditional supporters are reasserting their beliefs as the left becomes more confident. A special "After New Labour" conference, billed as a conference of left-wing Labour MPs and trade

⁴ For details, see A. Rawnsley, *Servants of the People. The Inside Story of New Labour*, London, 2001, pp. 298-299

unionists, took place in July 2002, stating that it wanted to reassert the more traditional principles of the party, such as protection of workers' rights and the public sector and ensuring a living wage for the poor in society. Reports from the conference did not, however, include the word 'Socialism'. This is perhaps appropriate, as affiliated members did not necessarily advocate a socialism that favoured the end of capitalism, but rather a fair deal for the working class.

This conference comes back to the idea suggested earlier that whoever led the party could claim to be representing the 'true' ideas of the Labour Party. Since Tony Blair has led Labour there has been an undeniable drift to the right, as Labour embraced big business whilst relegating the party's traditional base to a less than secondary position. It is therefore not surprising that rank and file members have begun to fight back, and that words such as 'reclaim' have been used. However, a similar 'fight back' would have taken place if the situation were reversed. Had left-wingers gained control of the party and formed a government, pursuing what it saw as 'traditional Labour values', of the sort that they are calling for now, those on the right of the movement would have argued that Labour was failing in its duty to rule for the whole nation, and thus betraying its 'inclusive' or 'broad church' tradition. Indeed, this happened in the early 1980s when right-wing social democrats broke away to form the Social Democratic Party.

While this is more a comment on Labour's traditions than it is about Labour and the USSR, it is worth noting that even now, nearly eleven years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and eight years after New Labour was born, the Conservatives still use this as a means to attack Labour. During their search for a replacement for William Hague, David Davis launched his campaign to be the Tories' leader by likening Labour's ten year vision for the NHS to Stalin's Five Year Plan, claiming that Labour had still not escaped the influence of the Soviet Union.

By drawing attention to the idea of a 'plan', Davis implied that New Labour is not so new and is modelling itself on the Soviet Union. He used the rhetoric of the Old Right to conjure up images of the USSR from the dead, to suggest that Labour's redefinition of itself is nothing more than a mask, that when lifted reveals the Hammer and Sickle. By pushing Labour back by trying to make New Labour Old again, Davis was trying to regain territory lost to Tony Blair. And in July 2002 the Tories criticised Labour's housing policy as Stalinist central planning, suggesting that the party was in some ways commemorating the 50th anniversary of Stalin's death.⁵ Even though the party is ideologically and temporally removed from the 1930s, the Opposition are still conjuring up the spectre of Stalin's Russia, attempting to use it as a way of attacking and defining the Labour Party.

Returning to Labour and the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the party has always sought to accommodate various strands of socialism, and in this decade this was made more difficult by the fact that one strand of Labour's socialism had a life of its own in the USSR. What happened there undoubtedly influenced what happened inside Labour's ranks. During the thirties, the Labour Party looked for, and found, an identity of its own that owed much to the presence of the Soviet Union.

⁵ *The Guardian*, 19 July 2002

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources: English Language

- Attlee, C. *The Labour Party in Perspective* (London, 1937)
- Brown, W. J. *Three Months in Russia*, (London, 1928)
- Buxton, D. F. *The Challenge of Bolshevism: A New Social Ideal* (London, 1928)
- Co-Operative Union, *Soviet Russia 1932* (Manchester, 1933)
- Citrine, W. *I Search for Truth in Russia* (London, 1936)
- Coates, W. P, & Z. *From Tsardom to the Soviet Constitution* (London, 1938)
- Cole, G. D. H. *Principles of Economic Planning* (London, 1935)
- Cole, G. D. H. *The Machinery of Socialist Planning* (London, 1938)
- Cole, G. D. H. *Principles of Planning* (London, 1938)
- Cole, G. D. H. *Plan for Democratic Britain* (London, 1939)
- Dalton, H. *Practical Socialism for Britain* (London, 1935)
- Feuchtwanger, L. *Moscow, 1937. My Visit Described for my friends* (London, 1937)
- Goldman, E. *Russia and the British Labour Delegation's Report: A Reply* (London, 1925)
- Goldman, E. *My Disillusionment in Russia* (London, 1925)
- Hamilton, M. A. *The Labour Party Today. What it is and how it works* (London, 1939)
- Hutt, A. *The Post-War History of the British Working Class* (London, 1937)
- Lansbury, G. *What I Saw in Russia* (London, 1920)
- Laski, H. *Communism* (London, 1927)
- Lyons, E. *Assignment in Utopia*, (London, 1938)
- MacDonald, J. R. *Wanderings and Excursions* (London, 1925)
- Maddox, W. P. *Foreign Relations in British Labour Politics* (Massachusetts, USA 1934)
- McHenry, D. E. *The Labour Party in Transition 1931-38* (London, 1938)

Muggeridge, M. *Winter in Moscow* (London, 1934)

Pankhurst, S. *Soviet Russia as I Saw it* (London, 1921)

Pankin, B. T. *Soviet Russia in 1930* (Stroud, 1930)

Philips, M. P. *The Soviet, The Terror and Intervention* (New York, 1920)

Philips, M. P. *My Reminiscences of the Revolution* (London, 1921)

Sarolea, C. *Impressions of Soviet Russia* (London, 1924)

Sloan, P. *I Search for Truth in Citrine: A Reply to Sir Walter* (London, 1936)

Snowden, P. *Socialism and Syndicalism* (London & Glasgow, no date)

Snowden, E. *Bolshevik Russia* (London, 1920)

Strachey, J. *The Coming Struggle for Power* (London, 1932)

Strachey, J. *What are we to do?* (London, 1938)

Strong, A. L. *The First Time in History* (London, 1924)

Webb, S. and B. *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation* (London, 1935)

Weir, L. M. *The Tragedy of Ramsay MacDonald* (London, 1938)

Wertheimer, E., *Portrait of the Labour Party* (London, 1930)

Wicksteed, A. *Ten Years in Soviet Moscow* (London, 1933)

Winter, E. *Red Virtue: Human Relationships in the New Russia* (London, 1933)

Winterton, P. *A Student in Russia* (Manchester, 1931)

Secondary Sources

Adelman, P. *The Rise of the Labour Party 1880-1945* (London, 1972)

Allender, P. *What's wrong with Labour? A critical history of the Labour Party in the twentieth century* (London, 2001)

Andrew, C. & Gordievsky, O. *KGB: The Inside Story of its Foreign Operations From Lenin to Gorbachev* (London, 1990)

Attlee, C. *As it Happened* (London, 1954)

Barker, S. *How the Labour Party works* (London, 1946)

- Bealey, F. (ed.) *The Social and Political Thought of the British Labour Party* (London, 1970)
- Beer, M. *A History of British Socialism* (London, 1940)
- Beetham, D. *Marxists in face of Fascism Writings by Marxists on Fascism from the inter-war period* (Manchester, 1983)
- Bennett, G. 'A most extraordinary and mysterious business': *The Zinoviev Letter of 1924* (London, 1999)
- Berger, S. *Social Democracy and the Working Class in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Germany* (Harlow, 2000)
- Bracher, K. D. *The German Dictatorship. The Origins, Structure and Consequences of National Socialism* (London, 1991)
- Brand, C. F. *The British Labour Party. A Short History* (California, USA, 1964)
- Branson, N. & Moore, B., *Our History. Labour-Communist Relations 1920-1951. Part I: 1920-1935*, Pamphlet 82, July 1990
- Briggs, A. & Saville, J. (eds.) *Essays in Labour History 1918-1939* (London, 1977)
- Brivati, B. & Heffernan, R. (eds.) *The Labour Party: A Centenary History* (Basingstoke, 2000)
- Brogan, C. *Fifty Years On* (London, 1950)
- Bullock, A. *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin volume one Trade Union Leader 1881-1940* (London, 1960)
- Buchanan, T. *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge, 1991)
- Buchanan, T. *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997)
- Callaghan, J. *The Far Left in British Politics* (Oxford, 1987)
- Callaghan, J. *Socialism in Britain* (Oxford, 1990)
- Carlton, D. *MacDonald versus Henderson: The Foreign Office of the Second Labour Government* (London, 1970)
- Carpenter, L. P. *G D H Cole: An Intellectual Biography* (London, 1973)
- Caute, D. *The Fellow-Travellers* (New York, 1973)

- Clegg, H. G. *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889, Volume II 1911-1933* (Oxford, 1987)
- Cliff, T. & Gluckstein, D. *The Labour Party – A Marxist History* (London, 1988)
- Coates, W. P. & Z. *A History of Anglo-Soviet Relations* (London, 1943)
- Cole, G. D. H. *Great Britain in the post-war world* (London, 1942)
- Cole, G. D. H. *A History of the Labour Party Since 1914* (London, 1948)
- Cole, G. D. H. *The British Labour Movement – Retrospect and Prospect* (London, 1951)
- Cole, G. D. H. *Socialism and Fascism 1931-1939* (London, 1961)
- Cole, M. (ed.) *Beatrice Webb's Diaries 1924-32* (London, 1956)
- Cole, M. *The Story of Fabian Socialism* (London, 1961)
- Dalton, H. *The Fateful Years: Memoirs 1931-1945* (London, 1957)
- Donughue, B. & Jones, G. W. *Herbert Morrison. Portrait of a Politician* (London, 1973)
- Dell, E. *A Strange Eventful History. Democratic Socialism in Britain* (London, 1999)
- Deutscher, I. *Stalin* (Harmondsworth, 1966)
- Dutt, R. P. *The Internationale* (London, 1964)
- Ellison, N. *Egalitarian Thought and Labour Politics. Retreating Visions* (London, 1994)
- Evans, J. N. *Great Figures in the Labour Movement* (London, 1966)
- Fischer, L. *The Soviets in World Affairs A History of the Relations between the Soviet Union and the Rest of the World 1917-1929*, second edition (Princeton, 1951)
- Foot, M. *Aneurin Bevin – Volume 1:1897-1945* (London, 1966)
- Foot, G. *The Labour Party's Political Thought. A History* (Houndmills, 1997)
- Gorodetsky, G. *The Precarious Truce. Anglo-Soviet Relations 1924-1927* (Cambridge, 1977)
- Gorodetsky, G. (ed.) *Soviet Foreign Policy 1917-1991 A Retrospective* (London, 1994)

- Graubard, S. R. *British Labour and the Russian Revolution 1917-1924* (London, 1956)
- Griffith, G. *Socialism and Superior Brains. The Political Thought of Bernard Shaw* (London, 1993)
- Harris, K. *Attlee* (London, 1982)
- Haslam, J. *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1930-33: The Impact of Depression* (London, 1983)
- Hinton, J. *Labour and Socialism* (Massachusetts, USA, 1983)
- Hobsbawm, E. *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* (New York, 1962)
- Hollis, P. *Jennie Lee: A Life* (Oxford, 1997)
- Howell, D. *British Social Democracy: A Study in Development and Decay* (London, 1976)
- Jones, B. *The Russia complex. The British Labour Party and the Soviet Union* (Manchester, 1977)
- Jones, M. *Michael Foot* (London, 1994)
- Laybourn, K. *A Century of Labour A History of the Labour Party 1900-2000* (Stroud, 2000)
- Lewis, J. *The Life & Teaching of Karl Marx* (London, 1965)
- Leventhal, F. M. *Arthur Henderson* (Manchester 1989)
- Liebman, M. *Leninism Under Lenin* (London, 1980)
- Lindemann, A. S. *A History of European Socialism* (New Haven, USA, 1983)
- Margulies, S. R. *The Pilgrimage to Russia: The Soviet Union and the Treatment of Foreigners 1924-1937* (Madison, USA, 1968)
- Mackenzie N. (ed.) *The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Volume III, Pilgrimage 1912-1947* (Cambridge, 1978)
- Mackenzie, N. & J. *The Diary of Beatrice Webb, Volume IV 1924-1943. 'The Wheel of Life'* (London, 1985)
- Mawdsley, E. *The Russian Civil War* (London 1987)
- McDermott, K. & Agnew, J. *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (New York, USA, 1997)

- McKenzie, R. *British Political Parties* (London, 1964)
- McKibben, R. *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-1924* (London, 1974)
- Miller, K. E. *Socialism and Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice in Britain to 1931* (The Hague, 1937)
- Milliband, R. *Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour* (Kent, 1972)
- Morgan, A. J. *Ramsay MacDonald* (Manchester, 1987)
- Morgan, K. O. *Labour People*, (Oxford, 1987)
- Morgan, K. *against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics 1935-1941* (Manchester, 1989)
- Morrison, H. *An Autobiography* (London, 1960)
- Muggeridge, M. *The Thirties* (London, 1940)
- Murphy, J. T. *Labour Big Three: a biographical study of Clement Attlee, Herbert Morrison and Ernest Bevin* (London, 1948)
- Narkiewicz, O. A. *Marxism and the Reality of Power 1919-1980* (London, 1981)
- Naylor, J. F. *Labour's International Policy the Labour Party in the 1930s* (London, 1969)
- Orwell, G. *Homage to Catalonia* (London, 1989)
- Pelling, H. *A Short History of the Labour Party* (London, 1985)
- Pelling, H. *A History of Trade Unionism* (Harmondsworth, 1987)
- Philips, G. *The Rise of the Labour Party 1893-1931* (London, 1992)
- Pimlott, B. *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge, 1977)
- Pimlott, B. *Hugh Dalton*, (London, 1985)
- Pritt, D. N. *From left to Right* (London, 1965)
- Radice, R. *Beatrice and Sidney Webb*, (Basingstoke, 1984)
- Rawnsley, A. *Servants of the People. The Inside Story of New Labour* (London, 2001)
- Read, C. *The Making and Breaking of the Soviet System* (Houndmills, 2001)
- Reynolds, P. A. *British Foreign Policy in the Inter-War Years* (London, 1954)

- Rose, T. (ed.) *Morgan Philips Price: Dispatches from the Revolution, Russia 1916-1918* (London, 1997)
- Sandle, M. *A short history of Soviet Socialism* (London, 1999)
- Sassoon, D. *One Hundred Years of Socialism The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1996)
- Schener, J. *George Lansbury* (Manchester, 1991)
- Segal, R. *The Tragedy of Leon Trotsky Traitor, hero or prophet?* (Harmondsworth, 1983)
- Shaw, G. B. *Everybody's Political What's What* (London, 1945)
- Shore, P. *Leading the Left* (London, 1993)
- Silverlight, J. *The Victors' Dilemma: Allied Intervention in the Russian Civil War* (London, 1970)
- Stansky, P. (ed.) *The Left and the War: The British Labour Party and World War 1* (USA, 1969)
- Stewart, M. *Protest or Power? A Study of the Labour Party* (London, 1974)
- Swift, J. *Labour in Crisis. Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in Opposition, 1931-40* (Houndmills, 2001)
- Tanner, D., Thane, P., and Tiratsoo, N. (eds.) *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000)
- Taylor, A. J. P. *English History 1914-1945* (London, 1975)
- Thomas, E. (ed.), *Tribune 21* (London, 1958)
- Thompson, N. *John Strachey: An Intellectual Biography* (Houndmills, 1993)
- Thompson, N. *Political Economy and the Labour Party* (London, 1996)
- Thorpe, A. *Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1992)
- Thorpe, A. *A History of the British Labour Party* (Houndmills, 1997)
- Thorpe, A. *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-1943* (Manchester, 2000)
- Ulam, A. B. *The Bolsheviks* (Massachusetts, 1998)
- Ullman, R. *Britain and the Russian Civil War November 1918 - February 1920* (Princeton, USA, 1968)

- Watson, B. *Freedom Under Planning* (London, 1945)
- Weinbren, D. *Generating Socialism Recollections of Life in the Labour Party* (Stroud, 1997)
- Wickham-Jones, M. *Economic Strategy and the Labour Party. Politics and policy-making, 1970-83* (London, 1996)
- Williams, F. *Fifty Years' March. The Rise of the Labour Party* (London, 1949)
- Williams, A. *Labour and Russia The attitude of the Labour Party to the USSR, 1924-1934* (Manchester, 1989)
- Wood, N. *Communism and British Intellectuals* (London, 1959)
- Wooton, B. *Freedom Under Planning* (London, 1945)
- Wrigley, C. *Arthur Henderson* (Cardiff, 1990)
- Wright, A. *British Socialism: Socialist thought from the 1880s to 1960s* (Harlow, 1983)

Secondary Sources: Russian Language

- Adibyeikov, G. M., Shakhnazarova, E. N., Shirinya, K. K., *Organizatsionnaya struktura Kominterna 1919-1943* (Moscow, 1997)
- Granov, V. *Glavnaya tsyel' vneshney politiki SSSR* (Moscow, 1962)
- Gromyko, A. A. and Ponomareva, B. N. (eds.) *Istoriya vneshney politiki SSSR Tom Perviy 1917-1945 gg.* (Moscow, 1986)
- Leybzona, B. M. and Shirinya, K. K. *Iz istoriya Kominterna* (Moscow, 1970)
- Nezhinskiy, L. N. (ed.) *Sovietskaya vneshnyaya politiki 1917-1945 gg. Poiski novykh podkhodov* (Moscow, 1992)
- Popov, V. I. *Diplomaticheski otnosheniya mezhdu SSSR i Anglie 1929-1939* (Moscow, 1965)
- Werth, N. *Istoriya Sovetskogo gosudarstva* (Moscow, 1999)

Russian Texts in Translation

Degras, J. (ed.) *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy*, volume II, 1925-1932 (London, 1952)

Degras, J. (ed.) *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy*, volume III, 1933-1941 (London, 1953)

Degras, J. (ed.) *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents* (3 vols., London, 1956-1965)

Lenin, V. I. *On Britain* (Moscow, no date)

Lenin, V. I. 'What Is To Be Done?' in *Selections From Lenin Vol. I 1893-1904* (London, 1929)

Lenin, V. I. *British Labour and British Imperialism* (London, 1969)

Lenin, V. I. 'State and Revolution' in *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1977)

Serge, V. *Russia Twenty Years After* (New Jersey, USA, 1996)

Volkov, S. (ed.) *Testimony. The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* (London, 1979)

Labour Party Publications

Labour Party, *Labour and the New Social Order* (London, 1918)

Labour Party, *Labour and the Nation* (London, 1928)

Labour Party, *Labour's Foreign Policy* (London, 1933)

Labour Party, *The Communist Solar System: The Communist International* (London, 1933)

Labour Party, *For Socialism and Peace: the Labour Party's Programme of Action* (London, 1934)

Labour Party, *Labour's Immediate Programme* (London, 1937)

Labour Party, *The Labour Party and the so-called "Unity Campaign"* (London, 1937)

Labour Party, *Labour Party Loyalty. An Appeal to the Movement* (London, 1937)

Labour Party, *Socialism or Surrender? Labour rejects the "Popular Front"* (London, 1939)

Labour Party, *The "Popular Front" Campaign: Declaration by the National Executive Committee* (London, 1939)

Labour Party, *Unity – True or Sham?* (London, 1939)

Labour Party, *Labour Party Annual Conference Reports* (London)

Labour Party, *Socialism or Surrender? Labour Rejects the "Popular Front"* (London, 1939)

Trade Union and labour movement publications

What Happened at Leeds – Report published by the Council of Workers and Soldiers' Delegates (London, 1917)

Trade Union Congress, *British Labour Delegation to Russia 1920 – Report* (London, 1920)

Trade Union Congress, *The Official Report of the British Trade Union Delegation to Russia in November and December 1924* (London, 1925)

Labour and Socialist International, *The Moscow Trial and the Labour and Socialist International* (London, 1931)

National Council of Labour, *Democracy versus Dictatorship* (London, 1933)

National Joint Council, *Communist and Other Organisations*, (London, 1933)

National Joint Council, *Down with Fascism* (London, 1933)

National Council of Labour, *British Labour and Communism*, (London, 1936)

New Fabian Research Bureau, *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia* (London, 1933)

New Fabian Research Bureau, *Why the USSR Joined the League* (London, 1935)

Independent Labour Party, *The I.L.P. in War and Peace A Short account of the Party from its foundations to the present day* (London, 1940)

Journal Articles

S. Berger. “‘Organising Talent and Disciplined Steadiness’: the German SPD as a model for the British Labour Party in the 1920s”, *Contemporary European History*, 5 (1996)

Bevir, M. ‘New Labour; a study in ideology’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2 (2000)

Brookshire, J. H. ‘ ‘Speak for England’, Act for England: Labour’s Leadership and British National Security Under the Threat of War in the Late 1930s’ *European History Quarterly*, 29 (1999)

Callinicos, A. ‘Reformism and Class Polarisation in Europe’, *International Socialism* (Autumn, 1999)

Jabara Carley, M. “‘A Fearful Concatenation of Circumstances’: the Anglo-Soviet Rapprochement, 1934-36’, *Contemporary European History*, 5 (1996)

G. Cohen. ‘The Independent Labour Party. Disaffiliation, Revolution and Standing Orders’, *History*, 86 (2001)

Cox, J. ‘Skinning a live tiger paw by paw: reform, revolution and Labour’, *International Socialism* 87 (Summer, 2000)

Fleay, C. and Sanders, M. L. ‘The Labour Spain Committee: Labour Party and the Spanish Civil War’ *The Historical Journal*, 28 (1985)

Kozlov, N. N. & Weitz, E. ‘Reflections on the Origins of the ‘Third Period’: Bukharin, the Comintern, and the Political Economy of Weimar Germany’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 24 (1989)

Little, D. ‘Red Scare, 1936: Anti-Bolshevism and the Origins of British Non-Intervention in the Spanish Civil War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23 (1988)

McDermott, K. ‘Stalin and the Comintern during the Third Period’, 1928-1933’, *European History Quarterly*, 25 (1995)

MacFarlane, L. J. ‘Hands Off Russia. British Labour and the Russo-Polish War, 1920’ *Past and Present*, 38 (1967)

Pugh, M. '“Class Traitors”: Conservative Recruits to Labour, 1900-30', *The English Historical Review*, CXII (February 1998)

Thorpe, A. 'Stalinism and British politics' *History*, 83 (1998)

White, S. 'British Labour in Soviet Russia, 1920', *English Historical Review*, 109 (1994)

Williams, A. 'The Labour Party's attitude to the Soviet Union, 1927-1935. An Overview with Specific Reference to Unemployment and Peace', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 22 (1987)

Newspapers: English Language

Chicago Tribune (Paris edition)

Daily Herald

Daily Worker

Manchester Guardian

New Clarion

New Leader (Labour Leader to 1924)

New Statesman and Nation

New York Times

The Socialist

Socialist Leaguer

The Times

Tribune

Russian newspapers

Izvestiya

Leningradskaya Pravda

Pravda

Trud

Official Papers

Public Record Office: Government papers

Cabinet Conclusions CAB 23/, CAB 24/, CAB 127

Foreign Office papers FO 65/, FO 181/, FO 184/, FO 371/, FO 418/, FO 448/,
FO 800/, FO 975/

Home Office papers PRO HW 17/

State Papers SP 91/

Travel Journals PRO 30/43

Individuals' papers – PRO:

Prime Minister's Papers, PREM 1/

James Ramsay MacDonald – PRO 30/69

Arthur Henderson, private papers while Foreign Secretary 1929-1931, FO 800/280/

Modern Record Centre, University of Warwick:

Ernest Bevin Papers - MSS 126/TG

TUC Papers - (TUC & Russia), 292/947

National Museum of Labour History, Manchester:

William Gillies Papers, WG/RUS/

Soviet sources: Official Papers, Congress Reports and Documents

Comintern files, fond 495/ 1930-1936, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political
History, Moscow

Profintern, *IV Kongress Profintern 17-marta – 3 apryelya, 1928* (Moscow, 1928)

Third International, *VII kongress Kommunisticheskogo Internatsionala i bor'ba protiv fashizma i voini, 1935* (Moscow, 1975)

Dokumenti vneshney politiki SSSR. Vol. VII (Moscow, 1963)

Dokumenti vneshney politiki SSSR. Vol. X (Moscow, 1965)

Dokumenti vneshney politiki SSSR. Vol. XII (Moscow, 1967)

Dokumenti vneshney politiki SSSR. Vol. XIII (Moscow, 1967)

Dokumenti vneshney politiki SSSR. Vol. XIV (Moscow, 1968)